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Contents

IN THIS ISSUE...

With some of the biggest managerial jobs becoming available over the coming months, in this issue we've diverted our attention away from the pitch and to the dugouts. As well as profiling some of the most exciting up-and-coming coaching talents from around the world, we also sent Josh Butler to meet a title-winning managerial double act in Norway and Ben McFadyean to Bochum to see their coach Uwe Rosler, while Henry Winter gives his take on England boss Thomas Tuchel and his new contract.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

FEATURES

36 World Cup watch
The big talking points as World Cup preparations ramp up

42 Up-and-coming coaches
Special feature on the world's brightest coaching talents

THE WORLD THIS MONTH
People in the news...on and off the pitch

4 **In pictures**
12 **Henry Winter** Tuchel's new deal a risk?
14 **Keir Radnedge** World Cup set for the United States again?
16 **Jonathan Wilson** Tactical trends not cyclical
17 **On the radar**
18 **Jim Holden** World Cup due an underdog winner?
19 **In numbers**
20 **Obituaries** Sepp Piontek
22 **Moves you might have missed**
23 **ESM XI**

EYEWITNESS
24 **Haiti**
28 **France**
32 **Serbia**

SPOTLIGHT
48 **Viking**
52 **Yan Diomande**

CLUB FOCUS
56 **Como**

SPECIAL FEATURE
62 **Scottish Premiership**

FACE TO FACE
68 **Uwe Rosler**
72 **Bubista**

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL
76 **NWSL preview**

MY BIGGEST GAME
99 **Dante**

18

52

56

72

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FOOTBALL 24-7

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SAVE MONEY ON WorldSoccer
Exclusive subscription offer
See page 10

World Service
Exclusive reports from our worldwide network of correspondents

86
80 **Asia** Asian Cup 2027 qualifiers & Finalissima
82 **AFCON 2027** Preliminary qualifiers
84 **Africa** CAF Champions League
86 **Asia** AFC Champions League Elite
88 **Canada** Canadian Premier League
90 **Sudan** Football finally returns
92 **Samoa** OFC Champions League qualifiers

PLUS 94 The Sweeper 95 Results, tables, fixtures

In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

Scotland...Youssef Chermiti scores a stunning overhead kick for Rangers against Celtic in the Old Firm Derby *(more on page 62)*

France...Argentinian forward Joaquin Panichelli celebrates scoring for Strasbourg in Ligue 1 *(more on page 28)*

Germany...a hare runs onto the field during the German Cup quarter-final between Holstein Kiel and Stuttgart

Italy...Como players celebrate beating Napoli on penalties to reach their first Coppa Italia semi-final in 40 years *(more on page 56)*

Spain...Real Betis fans outside Estadio La Cartuja for their La Liga clash with Sevilla. With Betis' ground undergoing renovations, this was the first Seville Derby played at the ground

Netherlands...Ukraine's Oleksandr Zinchenko goes down with a season-ending knee injury in only his second game for new club Ajax

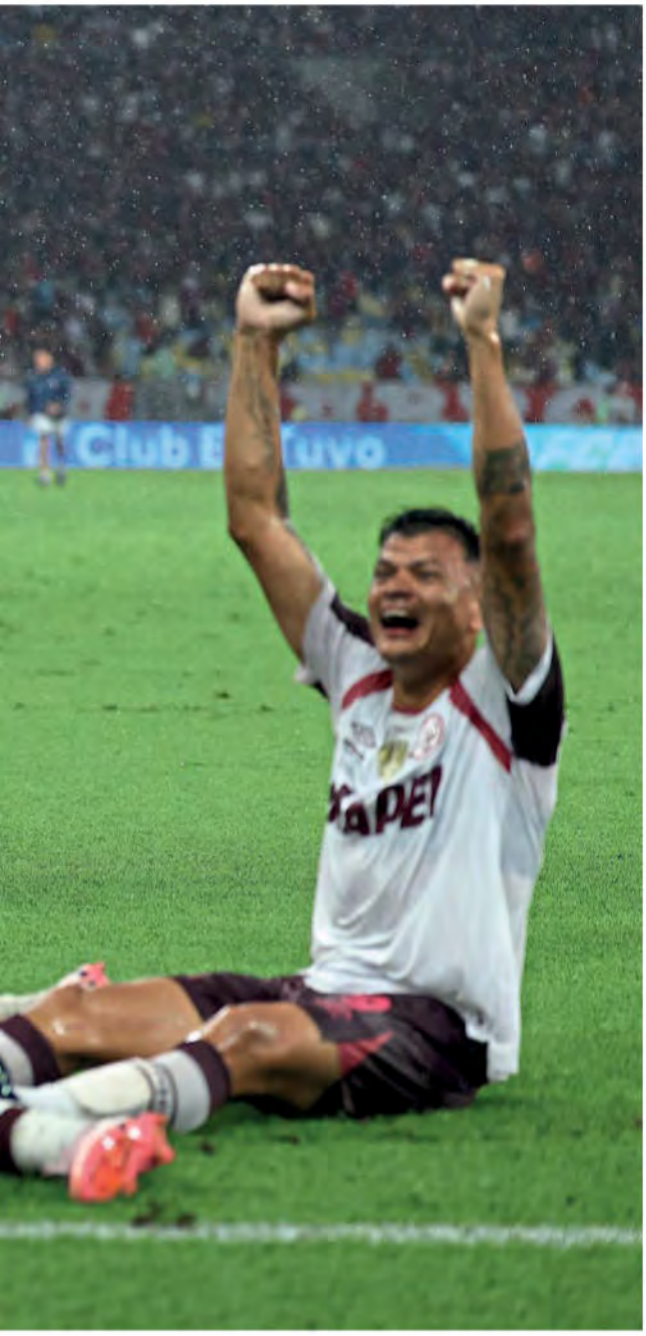
Serbia...riot police protect the Partizan players as they leave the pitch while Red Star fans throw fireworks during the Belgrade Derby *(more on page 32)*

Turkey...fans of Fenerbahce line the streets of Istanbul to welcome new signing N'Golo Kante

Mexico...soldiers from the Mexican army stand guard ahead of the friendly between Mexico and Iceland in Queretaro

Brazil...Lanus players celebrate a goal against Flamengo after beating the Brazilians at the Maracana to win the Recopa Sudamericana

Japan...fans of Machida Zelvia celebrate as their team finish top of the AFC Champions League Elite 2025-26 east group *(more on page 86)*



Australia...Sam Kerr celebrates scoring the opening goal of the 2026 Women's Asian Cup, her first international goal since late 2023

Brazil...Neymar celebrates after scoring a brace v Vasco da Gama on his first league start of the season for Santos *(more on page 36)*

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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Tuchel's new deal is a risk for the FA

Two more years... Tuchel's new deal keeps him with England until 2028

They read like suburban bus numbers: 65, 140, 173, 174, 32, 137, 36 and 61. They don't form a timetable, but the FIFA rankings of teams that Thomas Tuchel's England swept aside in qualifying for the 2026 World Cup. Here's another number: 19, the ranking of Senegal, who embarrassed England at the City Ground in a friendly on June 10.

This is not to throw Tuchel under the bus – that loss came in only his third game in charge, and England have been outstanding since, untouchable, their 4-2-3-1 system and most of the team looking settled. Yet the fact remains that England qualified for the World Cup without facing opposition of note. Tuchel is an exceptional tactician and man-manager, qualities seen in his club work and also in the way England's players have responded to him, but he's not been tested yet.

Even before Tuchel, England have yet to show they can take apart a team high in the rankings in the World Cup – the last time England beat a top-ten side at the World Cup was Argentina in the 2002 group stage – and yet the Football Association rewarded Tuchel with a two-year extension in February.

Why? How? When the FA started making plans to attend the UEFA Nations League draw in Brussels on February 12, Tuchel understandably wondered why he needed to go. His contract as England's head coach was due to run to the end of the 2026 World Cup in July. His brief didn't take in the Nations League, which commences in September. So why go?

Tuchel would inevitably be asked questions about England's chances in the Nations League, a competition that he wasn't going to be involved in. The FA took feedback from players, who were inevitably supportive, and the FA's desire to secure him long-term accelerated as the Nations League draw drew nearer. Tuchel was surprised and delighted and agreed. The deal was wrapped up quickly.

The attraction for Tuchel can't be financial. He could earn double his reported £5 million England salary in club management. It appears more about enjoyment levels, a work-life balance after being in coaching 25

years, and loving working with an exceptional set of players, who like him as a character and respect him hugely as a coach. Tuchel also knows that England have a very good chance of winning the 2028 European Championship, when the semi-finals and final will be at Wembley.

This summer's World Cup brims with challenges from climate to travel to opposition quality. There are "performance-related" conditions in the new deal, according to the FA, namely substantial bonuses but no confirmation over whether there is a break clause should England struggle at the World Cup. This seems risky.

It was the removal of the break clause in Fabio Capello's contract before the 2010 World Cup that caused such problems for the FA. It was a show of commitment by the FA to Capello, who had guided England effortlessly through qualifying, and also a slight show of panic as the Italian was being heavily linked with a move to Internazionale after the tournament. England were then so poor in South Africa, and tensions between manager and players like John Terry became obvious, that a parting of the ways would have been desirable. Instead, the contract continued, and the inevitable divorce did not occur until February 2012.

Was the FA spooked by headlines linking Tuchel with elite club jobs? Tottenham Hotspur would love him. So would Manchester United. Vacancies will arise on the continent. "Confidential," Tuchel replied when asked if he had had contact with clubs. So the FA acted. Maybe the CEO Mark Bullingham is convinced that Tuchel will lead England to glory at MetLife Stadium on July 19. If wealthy clubs do then come calling, the FA will be due considerable compensation. Or Tuchel decides to stay on, continue his contract, and go for European glory, too.

But what happens if England stink the World Cup out? Tuchel can't be properly judged yet, certainly not to the extent to handing out a new contract. Tuchel has undoubtedly developed England, backing talent like Morgan Rogers, Elliot Anderson and Nico O'Reilly. Most England fans would say that with this squad, and with standards and expectations raised by Gareth Southgate, that Tuchel has to reach the semi-finals. Anything less is failure.

Tuchel is an exceptional tactician and man-manager, but he's not been tested yet

"Some will ask: 'Why not wait until after the World Cup?'" Bullingham wrote on the FA website. "The reality is that for any fixed-term role in any industry, people will consider their future prior to its ending. We have a world-class coach, doing a great job and the opportunity arose to secure him for a further tournament."

Tuchel's extension is an admission of failure by Bullingham. "For the long term, we want to have a strong pipeline of home-grown coaches who can come through as potential candidates to manage our national teams," wrote Bullingham. For now, the likes of Eddie Howe, Frank Lampard and Lee Carsley must look at the England dressing-room and see the door locked to them.

Risky move... Tuchel with the FA's CEO Mark Bullingham

Carsley should be on the plane

Thomas Tuchel should be more grateful to Lee Carsley. England's trophy-winning Under-21s head coach keeps developing players who step up to the seniors. Of Carsley's back-to-back European champions, as many as ten could be in Tuchel's 26 for the World Cup: Elliot Anderson, Tino Livramento and Jarell Quansah from the 2025 winners, and James Trafford, Curtis Jones, Anthony Gordon, Morgan Gibbs-White, Cole Palmer, Noni Madueke and Levi Colwill (if fit) from the 2023 generation. So it is surprising, and disappointing, that Carsley has not been included in Tuchel's scouting units at the World Cup. It would have helped England, tapping into Carsley's knowledge of young players rising into opponents' senior sides, and also helped Carsley's own development as a head coach.

Cathro is a rising star

Speaking of managers, last month I spent some time in the company of two coaches in very different phrases of their careers: Qatar boss Julen Lopetegui, and former Newcastle United assistant coach Ian Cathro.

Julen Lopetegui is a curious head coach to evaluate. He gets criticised at times, didn't last long at West Ham United last season, yet left them in 14th and has since performed a near-miracle in guiding Qatar to the World Cup. He guided Spain through one of their most impressive qualifying campaigns, won the Europa League with Sevilla, rescued Wolverhampton Wanderers and still he gets questioned. Why?

As for Cathro, the Scotsman, 40 later this year, is now the much-admired head coach of Estoril Praia, and voted Coach of the Month for January by his peers in Portugal. We spoke about his time in England, working under Steve McClaren and Rafa Benitez at Newcastle, and under Nuno Espirito Santo at Wolverhampton Wanderers and Tottenham Hotspur.

Read Henry's interviews with Cathro and Lopetegui on worldsoccer.com

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

World Cup set for the United States again?

Gianni Infantino's manoeuvrings mean that the finals look like heading stateside again in 2038

Coming back to the US...will the MetLife Stadium host its second World Cup final in 2038?

Follow the money. Whoever may first have coined the trope lit the path for the FIFA of Gianni Infantino. This is precisely the reason the World Cup, after July, may well be heading back to the United States as soon as possible, which means 2038.

Observers already shifting nervously at the prospect of this year's giant step into the unknown – a three-nation hosting and 48-team schedule – may quake at the idea. But the groundwork has already been laid. Infantino's mission to monetise the World Cup as never before all point in the same direction of travel.

Infantino has been excoriated far and wide for his excessive adoration of US President Donald Trump, though this may be balanced by the priority for every FIFA supremo to keep the finals' host nation government onside. But Infantino can also be assessed as playing a long game to secure FIFA's enduring financial future and maintain the loyalty of a majority of its 211 members to ensure he stays in post long after Trump.

Briefly, Infantino was elected in 2016 to complete Sepp Blatter's four-year "mandate". This means that his election in 2019 was the first of a maximum three permitted under the term limit reforms. With no other possible opponent on the horizon, Infantino was re-elected in 2023 and can look forward to being re-confirmed in power in 2027. Thus he would be in place for the awarding, in 2030, of the 2038 finals.

Whether his loyal subjects amend FIFA's constitution to keep him in place ad infinitum is irrelevant.

FIFA's World Cup host rotation system, created by Blatter to send 2010 to South Africa, has evolved into a tool of presidential patronage. Thus 2026 goes to CONCACAF (the US, Canada and Mexico), the six-way eco-unfriendly 2030 encompasses Europe (Spain and Portugal), Africa (Morocco) and South America (Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay), while 2034 is Asian (Saudi Arabia) bringing the game full circle back to North America in 2038 – maybe with a token opening match in New Zealand to assuage Oceania.

Bear in mind also that Infantino has relocated a significant core of FIFA's administration, i.e. the legal department, to Coral Gables, Florida. Much else including FIFA+ digital

streaming and esports is also handled there, though Zurich still remains the official headquarters.

FIFA is not alone. Several other international sports federations have maintained the convenience of Swiss residency and its tax-friendly neutral stability while moving their operational centres elsewhere, often to suit the predilections of their presidents. In FIFA's case, like it or not, heading west represents the most fundamental DNA shift in its 122 years.

Returning to the US for 2038 would not only be an international event but a local one for FIFA, given the steady progress of association football in North America since the World Cup first landed in 1994. The proximity to Wall Street, the tech behemoths of Silicon Valley and the associated dollar-heavy media provide a level of corporate synergy far beyond anything Zurich can offer. In addition, more than enough stadia exist as well as an unparalleled commercial appetite for what is known as premium hospitality.

Look at it this way: the 2026 finals are projected to generate roughly $11 billion in revenue, more than the $7.5bn raised in the four-year Qatar 2022 cycle. For a FIFA president obsessed with "expanding the cake," the American market is the only one capable of sustaining such exponential growth. Infantino told the World Economic Forum in Davos, quoting a joint study by the World Trade Organization, that the 2026 finals could generate $80.1bn in gross output globally, adding up to $40.9bn in GDP and creating 824,000 jobs.

In the end, the case for a return to the US alone in 2038 is nothing to do with sporting romance and all about arithmetic; simply, there is more money in America than anywhere else.

While Joao Havelange expanded FIFA's financial and political outreach and Blatter helped expand the map, Infantino wants his own legacy; he can be seen as the man who made FIFA a financial untouchable, a non-profit operation that became a global commercial monolith. For Infantino, clearly, the US is not only an organisationally competent host but a safeguard against international economic volatility.

What's not to like?

> The case for a return to the US alone in 2038 is nothing to do with sporting romance and all about arithmetic; simply, there is more money in America than anywhere else

Plenty. The massive expansion of the World Cup finals has placed hosting ambitions beyond the reach of most of FIFA's members; they must be satisfied with the crumbs of age-group tournaments and recalibrated regionalised club challenges. This is nothing new. Member associations have been acquiescing in this strategy for years now. Their reward for subservience is to be found in the annual handouts which trickle down from the World Cup.

Only one confederation has the power to go its own way: UEFA. Some 90% of the world game's wealth has been estimated as residing in Europe. The Champions League is forecast to generate more than $20bn over the next four years, way beyond the World Cup tally. Only the Olympic Games approaches the World Cup in terms of international societal status.

When the 2026 revenues are distributed, and the bank transfers for hundreds of millions of dollars land in European FA accounts, the scepticism will melt away. Even England's FA and Germany's DFB know they can rely on FIFA largesse to assist in grassroots development. If Infantino can promise that a 2038 US World Cup will double the 2026 pot, then European opposition will again be reduced to a few grumbles about travel distances and time zones, quickly silenced by the sound of the metaphorical cash register.

Infantino knows that while his old European employers may not like him and may distrust his power plays, they would be unanimously content in accepting his price for crossing the Atlantic twice in 12 years. Following the money, indeed.

Wanting his own legacy...Gianni Infantino promoting the FIFA World Cup inside the White House

BOOKS THIS MONTH

NO SHOW
By James Bennett (Pitch Publishing, £19.99)

No Show: The World Cup Teams That Never Were is a fascinating collection of 24 stories of the greatest teams that failed to qualify for the FIFA World Cup finals. The tales range from continental giants that became inexplicable absentees to heartbreaking stories of underdogs coming oh-so-close. Together, these stories create a patchwork of the trials and tribulations of World Cup qualifying.

MUNDIALES
By Mark Biram & Tim Vickery (Pitch Publishing, £25)

Mundiales tells the story of the World Cup from a South American perspective. From Uruguay's Olympic triumphs in 1924 and 1928 pre-dating the official tournament to Lionel Messi cementing his legend in 2022, Mark Biram and *World Soccer*'s very own Tim Vickery reveal how the continent shaped football's greatest stage, blending drama, politics, identity, tragedy and glory into a rich tale previously untold in the English language.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Tactics aren't cyclical

Trends may come and go, but there is nothing predictable or inevitable about tactical evolution

One of the greatest misconceptions around football is the idea that tactics are cyclical; they are not. The seasons are a cycle: spring follows winter follows autumn follows summer, every year in that order. The moon follows a cycle: new moon, waxing crescent, first quarter, waxing gibbous, full moon, waning gibbous, third quarter, waning crescent. But there is nothing predictable or inevitable about tactical evolution.

Which is not to say either that tactical evolution is linear. This is not some straight drive from ignorance towards knowledge. And yet knowledge is gained along the way. Even if there have at times been a cyclical quality to some evolution, each new cycle is undertaken in the knowledge of what went before, and is amended by that experience: less a cycle, then, than a helix. But while it may be useful at times to conceive of the development of tactics as helical, that is an extremely simplified model.

Descriptions of tactical development as cyclical tend to mean one of two things. Perhaps most common is the recognition that a style or ploy that used to be popular then faded has recurred. This season, for instance, has had a very retro feel. Leeds and Liverpool (in the Premier League) and Nigeria (at the Africa Cup of Nations) have at times used a front two, Leeds in a 3-5-2, the other two in more of a 4-3-1-2 with Ademola Lookman or Florian Wirtz almost as an old-fashioned number ten. There's been a very late-1980s focus on long throws and in-swinging corners, and a general shift away from the prevailing possession models to something more direct. But that doesn't mean we're living through the 1980s again.

Direct football... more long throws doesn't mean a return to the '80s

For a long time, tactical development was essentially about moving players from the front end of the pitch to the back. England played a 1-2-7 in the first international, in 1872, and were held to a 0-0 draw by a Scotland side in a 2-2-6 formation. The sense that centre-forwards could get in each others' way and that one might be better deployed as a central midfielder took hold in the mid-1880s, leading to the 2-3-5. In Britain at least, that remained fairly standard until the increasing use of the offside trap led to a change in the offside law in 1925, after which teams began withdrawing the centre-half and making up the shortfall in midfield by pulling back the inside-forwards into a 3-2-2-3 or W-M. That yielded over time to 4-2-4, then 4-3-3 and, in the mid-1960s, 4-4-2.

But by then, everything was becoming more complicated. Football was becoming systematised. In some areas pressing was taking hold, in others a *Libero* was deployed. There were no real new shapes to be discovered, other than adding a fifth midfielder, although in practice 4-5-1 was usually either a 4-2-3-1 or 4-3-3 with more withdrawn wide forwards.

> Tactical evolution can be considered as a series of interlocking dialectics, which is what creates the illusion of the cyclical

Thereafter, tactical evolution can be considered as a series of interlocking dialectics, which is what creates the illusion of the cyclical. To offer a practical example, how did you overcome the defensiveness of Helenio Herrera's Inter in their *Catenaccio* pomp? With the sort of all-out attacking, full-backs pouring forward, offered by Celtic. But how

Old-fashioned number ten... Florian Wirtz

then to overcome that sort of swarm? By sitting deep, absorbing pressure and playing long balls into the space left by defenders pushing high up the pitch.

Or a more recent case study: Pep Guardiola's re-invocation of Total Football meant that for a while, the game seemed to become almost entirely about possession. How then to deal with opponents who retained possession so well? By regaining it better: hence Jurgen Klopp and *Gegenpressing*, which itself of course was a re-invocation of the other aspect of Total Football. Attack competes with defence. Direct football competes with possession. A high line competes with a low block. Pressing competes with absorbing. Control competes with a willingness to ride the chaos. And somewhere a consensus or synthesis is found and the prevailing football of the age emerges.

But those are internal matters, ideas applied and reapplied, tweaked and refined – and football is not a closed system. There are also external factors. They could be political: there is a correlation, for instance, between military dictatorship and a footballing style that prioritises physicality and cynicism. They could be climactic: hot weather militates against ferocious pressing, while heavy rainfall makes rapid short passes harder. They could be to do with amendments in the laws. Or they could be scientific. Pressing, for instance, really took off as nutrition and sports science improved from the 1960s onwards and it became possible to run for 90 minutes. Or Guardiola's *juego de posicion* was made possible by the improvement in pitch technology in the early part of this century that effectively meant players could take their first touch for granted and focus not in trapping the ball but on the manipulation of space. The introduction of VAR, as discussed in this column in January, has already changed the game beyond refereeing decisions.

Tactical evolution is driven by a multiplicity of factors. It reflects off itself and is conditioned by external forces. It is shaped by broader sociological forces and also by the inspiration of great coaches. It is complicated, inconsistent and contingent. But it is not cyclical.

Mateus MANE

(Wolverhampton Wanderers)

Mane is at the centre of an international tug of war after Portugal head coach Roberto Martinez made it clear that he wants to add the young Wolves forward to his squad.

In a trying season for the Premier League strugglers, Mane has been a rare highlight since breaking into the team at the start of the year, becoming the club's youngest-ever Premier League goalscorer.

The 18-year-old was born in Portugal but has lived in England for more than half of his life, moving to Manchester at the age of eight. In October 2024, he was invited to play for both the English and Portuguese Under-18 sides, but opted for the Young Lions and has since won seven caps at that level.

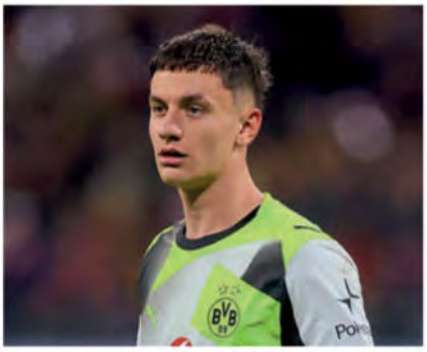
Figures at the Portuguese FA are keen on bringing Mane into the fold, although he is unlikely to play at this summer's World Cup for either country.

Joel PIROE
(Leeds United)
The Dutch-born Leeds striker is dreaming of the World Cup after declaring for Suriname ahead of their play-off clash with Bolivia.

Stephan LICHTSTEINER
(Basel)
Basel hired the ex-Arsenal and Juventus right-back as head coach in January, but he's already under pressure after one win in his first seven games. Meanwhile, new boys Thun continue to pull clear at the top of the Swiss league.

Ajay TAVARES
(Barcelona)
Norwich City's sporting director Ben Knapper spoke of the club's "immense pride" after their youth academy product joined Barcelona. The England Under-17 international forward will link up with Barca's youth team.

Luca REGGIANI
(Borussia Dortmund)
A relatively rare case of an Italian youth player developing abroad, the tall, quick 18-year-old centre-back has impressed since making his Dortmund debut in February. Captained Italy at last year's Under-17 World Cup in Qatar.



Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

The year of the underdog

The World Cup is due an unlikely winner – can it be Erling Haaland and Norway?

Maybe it's just wishful thinking, but wouldn't it be a wonderful tonic for the game if football history and logic are swept aside at this summer's World Cup and the tournament is won by a "small" soccer nation?

Football's most prestigious prize has been disputed for 96 years, yet only eight countries have lifted the trophy, and several of these – Argentina, France, Spain, England, Brazil – will be favourites to triumph again. The big beasts of international soccer always win, don't they? Why should it be any different this time?

Well, firstly, upsets do happen in sport. Fairy tales like Leicester City winning the Premier League title can be real, and a surprise champion will eventually capture the World Cup. It seems to me, also, that the standards of international teams across the globe are closer than ever before. And, finally, there are three countries whose spirit, form and talent can make them genuine contenders.

Senegal won the Africa Cup of Nations in January and are now 12th in the FIFA world rankings. They won 3-1 against England last year to showcase their combination of experience, defensive solidity and goal threat from high-class forwards like Sadio Mane. They are a proper team that everyone will be wary of, and even stronger than the 2002 side that reached the quarter-finals.

Look out, too, for Ecuador, who finished second in the South American qualifying section, conceding only five goals in 18 matches. They are incredibly hard to beat, their only two defeats 1-0 away to Argentina and Brazil. And now, under relatively new head coach Sebastian Beccacece, they are adding adventure and flair in attack to complement a formidable defence. The world rankings lie when they place Ecuador in 23rd.

World Cup underdogs... can Haaland and Norway cause an upset this summer?

Even more absurd is the idea that Norway are only the 32nd best international team in world football at the moment. Really? A team that thrashed four-time world champions Italy home and away in qualifying? One that scored a remarkable 37 goals in eight matches with a 100% record? Not likely.

> To triumph at tournaments you need a variety of factors…above everything is a champion goalscorer – and Norway have the finest

Perhaps this ranking reflects past disappointments rather than current vibrancy. Norway are a team from nowhere in terms of past competitions. Their previous participation at a World Cup finals was in 1998, while their last major tournament was Euro 2000. Today, they are very far from a team of nobodies.

Midfield maestro Martin Odegaard is the captain of Arsenal, a supreme playmaker with silky touches and precision passing. Other high-class stars include winger Antonio Nusa of RB Leipzig, striker Alexander Sorloth of Atletico Madrid, and steel-edged wing-back Julian Ryerson of Borussia Dortmund. Most of all, though, there is Manchester City striker Erling Haaland.

To triumph at tournaments you need a variety of factors. One fundamental is team spirit and harmony, which Norway possess in abundance. Another is an experienced goalkeeper, like Orjan Nyland of Seville with 67 caps.

Above everything is a champion goalscorer – and Norway have the finest.

Haaland already ranks among the great strikers of any era of soccer. The statistics do not lie. He is the only player to have a goal-per-game record in the Champions League, 56 goals in 56 matches at the end of this season's league phase.

The rampaging striker is even more prolific on the international stage, having netted 55 goals in 48 matches for Norway. It is a scoring rate of 1.15 goals per game, the best of any male player in the post-war era with more than 50 goals. For comparison, look at these scoring rates: Pele 0.84, Cristiano Ronaldo 0.63, Lionel Messi 0.59, Kylian Mbappe 0.59, and Harry Kane 0.70. Only two other strikers are above one goal per game – Gerd Muller and Sandor Koscis, both at 1.1.

In the qualifying group, Haaland plundered 16 goals in eight matches, and if he brings that stunning form to the tournament itself then Norway can beat anybody this summer. And they can win the World Cup.

Of course, there will be many ifs and buts along the way. But, but, let me finish with a curious fact. Norway are the only national team which has never lost to either Brazil or Argentina – in four matches against Brazil and twice against Argentina. If that record is still intact by July 19, 2026, then could a ninth name be etched onto the famous trophy?

"[I am] completely, utterly opposed to any kind of discrimination or prejudice, or ignorance, or stupidity. If my player did not respect these principles…then that player's career will come to an end"

Jose Mourinho on Gianluca Prestianni, the Benfica player subject to a UEFA investigation after being accused of racially abusing Vinicius Junior. Prestianni denies directing racial abuse towards the Real Madrid winger

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month…

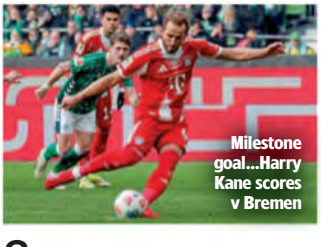
2031
Year that Igor Thiago will remain at Premier League side Brentford after the Brazilian striker signed a contract extension with the Bees.

34.2%
Thomas Frank's win ratio in 38 games in charge of Tottenham Hotspur, the worst record of any permanent Spurs manager.

83
Cameroon caps won by Nicolas Nkoulou, with the former Monaco, Marseille and Watford defender announcing his retirement from football in February.

44
Days that former Minnesota United head coach Eric Ramsay spent in charge of West Bromwich Albion before being sacked by the Championship club.

500
Career-goal milestone reached by Bayern Munich striker Harry Kane after scoring a brace against Werder Bremen in the Bundesliga.



Milestone goal…Harry Kane scores v Bremen

8
Next year's Africa Cup of Nations will be the first time in eight years that the finals have taken place in the summer after CAF president Patrice Motsepe announced that the 2027 edition in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda will take place in June and July.

Star attractions… Son Heung-min and Lionel Messi ahead of LAFC v Inter Miami

75,673
Attendance for the game between Los Angeles FC and Inter Miami, the largest crowd for an MLS opening-weekend fixture and the second highest in MLS history.

25%
Percentage of Spanish team Almeria that Cristiano Ronaldo now owns after the Portugal and Al Nassr star purchased a stake in the Saudi-owned club.

$22m
Fee paid by Toronto FC to sign United States striker Josh Sargent from Norwich City, the third-biggest transfer in MLS history.

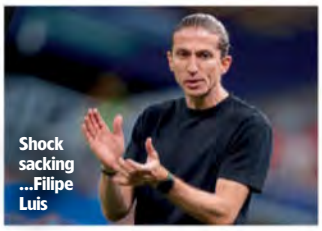
£2.8m
Fee that Liverpool have been ordered to pay Chelsea in compensation for Rio Ngumoha after a tribunal ruled on the teenager's September 2024 transfer between the clubs.

€18m
Transfer fee paid by Besiktas to sign Ivory Coast centre-back Emmanuel Agbadou from Wolverhampton Wanderers, the second-biggest signing in the Turkish club's history.

16
Years, four months and 29 days, the age of Cavan Sullivan when he scored for Philadelphia Union in the 2026 CONCACAF Champions Cup, making him the youngest-ever American scorer in the competition and the third-youngest overall. The teenager will join Manchester City when he turns 18 in 2027.

11
Consecutive international matches that Erling Haaland has scored in, matching a 64-year-old record held by former Malaysia striker Abdul Ghani Minhat. If the Norway striker scores again against the Netherlands in March, he will be the outright record-holder.

10
Weeks after signing a new contract with Flamengo that Filipe Luis was sacked by the South American champions (more on page 44).



Shock sacking …Filipe Luis

44,379
Attendance for Australia's 1-0 win over the Philippines in the opening game of the 2026 AFC Women's Asian Cup, a new record crowd in the continental competition.

40
Members of the LMA's Hall of Fame 1,000 Club after Celtic boss Martin O'Neill became the latest manager to take charge of 1,000 professional matches.

654
Games Brighton's James Milner played to overtake Gareth Barry as the Premier League's all-time record appearance-maker.

18
Years and 230 days, the age of Lamine Yamal when he scored the first hat-trick of his career in Barca's win over Villarreal, making him the youngest player to score a treble in a La Liga match for the club.

Barcelona hat-trick hero… Lamine Yamal

114
Days that Sean Dyche took charge of Nottingham Forest before being sacked and replaced by former Wolves boss Vitor Pereira. The only shorter Premier League tenure at the club was Dyche's predecessor, Ange Postecoglou.

5
Goals scored by PSG v Marseille as the French champions beat their rivals 5-0 in *Le Classique*.

"Sepp Piontek, a pipe-smoking West German, is one of those managers (and there seem to be fewer and fewer of them these days) who prefer to let their players take centre stage"

The December 1983 issue of *World Soccer*, in which Piontek was named World Manager of the Year

OBITUARIES

Sepp PIONTEK

(1940-2026)

Sepp Piontek thought his World Cup dream had died when fellow Werder Bremen full-back Horst-Dieter Hottges was preferred by Helmut Schon in West Germany's squad for the 1966 finals in England. Piontek, in his disappointment, had no way of knowing that he would enjoy a starring role as a coach himself at the World Cup 20 years later but with Denmark.

Piontek learned to cope with turbulence from an early age. He had been born in the south-eastern German city of Breslau in 1940, but his family fled west as the redrawing of the post-war map saw the city transformed into Polish Wroclaw. Piontek's family settled in faraway Leer up near the German-Dutch border. He learned his football with local club VfL Germania Leer before moving up to Werder Bremen, his only senior club.

Between 1960 and 1972, Piontek made more than 300 appearances, mostly as a steady, reliable right-back, winning the German Cup in 1961 and Bundesliga in 1964-65. He played six times for West Germany before retiring after injury and taking over as Bremen coach. Next came spells with Fortuna Dusseldorf and St Pauli either side of a two-year adventure as national coach of Haiti between 1976 and 1978. He would never work in Germany again.

The Danish federation, having opened the national team door to foreign-based professionals, was looking for its first full-time coach. The DBU, on the recommendation of DFB president Hermann Neuberger, chose Piontek in preference to more high-profile names like Hennes Weisweiler, Helmuth Johannsen and Udo Lattek. Correctly, it considered Piontek's north German mentality made him an appropriate fit.

Award-winning ...a page from the December 1983 issue of *World Soccer*

"Danish Dynamite" ...Denmark's players line up at the 1986 World Cup in Mexico

In 115 matches over the next decade, Piontek led Denmark to the semi-finals of Euro 1984 and to the World Cup finals for the first time in 1986. An energetic, entertaining team featuring Preben Elkjaer, Michael Laudrup and Jesper Olsen earned the label of "Danish Dynamite" on their way to the quarter-finals in Mexico. Piontek resigned after the failure to qualify for the 1990 World Cup, but his legacy was the foundation of Denmark's team who achieved a remarkable European Championship triumph in 1992.

By then, Piontek had moved on to take over the Turkey national team. He stayed in the country with Bursaspor before returning to Denmark with Aalborg and Silkeborg then, finally, the Greenland national team.

Piontek's achievements were recognised with many honours including the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1986 and *World Soccer* Manager of the Year in 1983. In 2011, he was the first foreigner inducted into the Danish Football Hall of Fame, a rare honour in a football culture which had come to regard him as one of its own.

Eddy ANTOINE

(1949-2026)

Central midfielder in Haiti's "golden generation" who played in all three matches on their World Cup debut in West Germany in 1974. Played his club football with Racing Club Haitien then in the United States with New Jersey Brewers and Chicago Sting.

Manuel "Manolin" BUENO

(1940-2026)

Manolin Bueno's career was a tale of club loyalty unthinkable today. The Seville-born left-winger had spent two bright years with Cadiz before joining Real Madrid in what proved a life-defining transfer in 1959. Bueno found a dressing room filled with superstars, including legendary Francisco Gento in his own position, and spent most of his time in the shadows, happy to reject a string of offers while sharing in Madrid's success.

In 12 seasons, Bueno scored 27 goals in 119 appearances in all competitions, occasionally playing out of position at outside-right. He was part of a dynasty. During his time at the club, Madrid won eight La Liga titles and two European Cups, while he remained committed in training, supportive on the sidelines and ever ready when needed. Madrid always handed the captaincy to the longest-serving player: thus, when Gento was unfit for the 1971 European Cup Winners' Cup final replay against Chelsea, Bueno not only took his

Real Madrid hero...the Bernabeu pays tribute to *Los Blancos* stalwart Manolin Bueno

"Our first-ever No.7 and a goalscorer in the first official match for England women, Lynda will always be remembered for the part she played in our football history"

FA chair Debbie Hewitt pays tribute to former England Women's star Lynda Hale

place on the wing but as captain.

Asked later whether he regretted so many years in Gento's shadow, Bueno answered: "Not everyone gets to be part of history – and Real Madrid are history."

Vasilios DANIIL
(1938-2026)
Greek manager of several clubs in his home country across a 22-year career, most notably Panathinaikos, whom he led in three separate spells and won the league-cup double in 1991.

He was appointed by the national team ahead of the qualifying campaign for Euro 2000, but failed to reach the finals. His last game in charge was a 2002 World Cup qualifier against England in Athens in the summer of 2001, when a 2-0 defeat led to him being replaced by Otto Rehhagel.

Lynda HALE
(1954-2026)
Hale was a historic player in the history of women's football, scoring in England Women's first-ever official international, a 3-2 win over Scotland in 1972. The winger also won seven Women's FA Cups with Southampton.

Rino MARCHESI
(1937-2026)
Some of Italy's biggest clubs mourned the passing of Marchesi, a figure of Italian football for almost 40 years as both a player and manager.

As a player, he starred in defence and midfield for Atalanta, Lazio and Fiorentina, winning the Coppa Italia twice and European Cup Winners' Cup with the latter, and was capped twice by Italy in 1961.

After hanging up his boots in 1973, he embarked on a managerial career that saw him coach stars like Diego Maradona and Michel Platini. As well as two spells in charge of Napoli and two seasons at the helm of Juventus during the 1980s, he also coached Internazionale, Como, Udinese and Lecce in Italy's top flight.

Peter MEYER
(1940-2026)
Legend of Fortuna Dusseldorf who was a high-scoring forward in the pre-Bundesliga regional league.

Hamburg hero... Horst Schnoor

In 1966 he scored twice in the 5-1 victory over Kickers Offenbach which lifted Fortuna up into the Bundesliga for the first time.

After relegation, he moved to Borussia Monchengladbach in 1967. That same year he made his West Germany debut in a 0-0 draw with Albania but a leg fracture in training effectively ended his international career when it had barely begun.

Mostafa RIAD
(1941-2026)
Egypt international who scored nine goals at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 and played at the Africa Cup of Nations finals in 1962 and 1963. A stalwart of club side Tersana, he finished as top scorer in the Egyptian league two seasons in a row.

Trailblazer... Nambatingue Toko

Hernan RODRIGUEZ
(1933-2026)
The oldest living Chile international before his death aged 92. Rodriguez starred in midfield as the captain of Colo-Colo from 1954 until 1961, scoring 16 goals in 130 games in helping the team win the league in 1956 and 1960 as well as the Chilean Cup in 1958.

Rodriguez played 22 times for Chile and was a member of their squad at the 1959 Copa America in Argentina. He captained Chile on a European tour in the spring of 1961 but had fallen out of favour by the time of the World Cup on home soil a year later.

Jose Luis "Pete" RUSSO
(1958-2026)
Uruguay defender who won 15 caps between 1979 and 1986. Made his name with Defensor, playing the great Fernando Morena out of the game on his debut against Penarol. Later won the title with Penarol as well as having spells in Colombia (Tolima), Brazil (Palmeiras) and Chile (Deportes Iquique).

Horst SCHNOOR
(1934-2026)
Only two players have made more appearances for Hamburg than Schnoor, who played almost 500 games in goal for the German side between 1952 and 1969.

Nambatingue TOKO
(1952-2026)
The first star to emerge from the arid central African country of Chad, starting out in the lower ranks of French football at Grenoble and Albi before Nice signed him in 1975. He went on to Bordeaux and won the Ligue 1 title in 1978-79 with Strasbourg, before a spell at Valenciennes and then Paris Saint-Germain, scoring *Les Parisiens* first-ever goal in European competition and in two Coupe de France finals as they won in 1982 and 1983. He finished his playing days at neighbouring Racing Club, but returned to PSG in 1989 as an assistant coach and later worked in the club's recruitment department.

Georgi VELINOV
(1957-2026)
Iconic CSKA Sofia goalkeeper who won six Bulgarian titles in two different stints at the club, either side of a spell in Portugal with Braga, Atletico CP and O Elvas. Won 28 caps for his country and was named Bulgarian Footballer of the Year in 1981.

Reinhold WOSAB
(1938-2026)
One of the 1960s heroes of Borussia Dortmund, scoring 60 league goals in 198 appearances, mostly as an outside-right but also at full-back. Famously in 1965, a Wosab shot against Karlsruhe flew through a hole in the side net and the referee awarded a goal. Wosab also struck memorable European Cup goals against Benfica and Dukla Prague in 1963-64 and was a member of BVB's triumphant European Cup Winners' Cup squad in 1965-66. Later spent two years with VfL Bochum before returning to the Dortmund administration.

Words by Keir Radnedge, Greg Whelan, Mark Gleeson and Jamie Evans

Former clubs... Como and Inter pay their respects to Rino Marchesi

"We are working on having Leo play for Newell's in the first half of 2027, but for now, that's all"

Juan Manuel Medina, vice-president of Newell's Old Boys, tells Argentine publication *TN* that they are working on a deal to bring Lionel Messi back to Rosario. The first half of next year presents an opportunity as MLS transitions to a summer-spring format

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

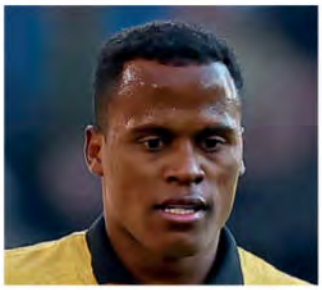
TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Philippe COUTINHO

The playmaker was released by his boyhood club **Vasco da Gama**, citing "mental exhaustion". The Brazilian side also fired head coach Fernando Diniz after a poor start.

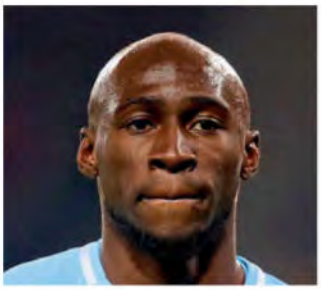
Raheem STERLING

After being released by Chelsea in January, Sterling signed for Dutch side **Feyenoord** as a free agent. He made his debut as a substitute in the Eredivisie clash with Telstar.



Jhon ARIAS

The former Fluminense midfielder returned to Brazil to join **Palmeiras**, having struggled to adapt at Wolves after joining the Premier League club last summer.



Eliaquim MANGALA

The ex-Porto, Valencia, Manchester City and France defender joined Bolivian side **Oriente Petrolero** as a free agent, seven months after being released by Estoril.

Michail ANTONIO

After being without a club since his release from West Ham last summer following a serious car crash in late 2024, the Jamaica forward joined Qatari Stars League side **Al-Sailiya**.

Habib BEYE

Following the departure of Roberto De Zerbi, **Marseille** appointed their former player as coach. Meanwhile, Rennes swiftly replaced Beye with ex-Nice boss Franck Haise.

Marcelo GALLARDO

Gallardo's first spell at **River Plate** was so good they built a statue of him at the ground, but his return didn't go to plan. He left the club for the second time in February.

Imanol ALGUACIL

Highly rated for his work at Real Sociedad, Alguacil left as coach of Saudi Pro League side **Al Shabab** by mutual consent. He has already been linked with a return to La Liga.

Martin DEMICHELIS

The former manager of River Plate and Monterrey took his first job in Europe by joining La Liga strugglers **Mallorca**. He played over 90 La Liga games for Malaga and Espanyol.

Michael O'NEILL

For the second time, O'Neill took a club job alongside his national team role with Northern Ireland after taking charge of **Blackburn Rovers**. In 2019, he took over at Stoke City.

Mano MENEZES

In their first permanent managerial appointment since sacking Jorge Fossati in January 2025, **Peru** turned to the former Corinthians and Brazil manager Menezes.

Madjid BOUGHERRA

In other national team appointments, Bougherra, Bostjan Cesar, Oswaldo Vizcarrondo and Patrice Neveu took charge of **Lebanon**, Slovenia, Venezuela and Togo respectively.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

David Raya (Arsenal)	18
Gianluigi Donnarumma (Man City)	6
Anatoliy Trubin (Benfica)	6
Mike Maignan (Milan)	5
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	3
Mile Svilar (Roma)	3
Alisson (Liverpool)	2
Marco Carnesecchi (Atalanta)	2
Joan Garcia (Barcelona)	2
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Oliver Baumann (Hoffenheim)	1
Lucas Chevalier (PSG)	1
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	1
Dean Henderson (Crystal Palace)	1
Luiz Junior (Villarreal)	1
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	1
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Marseille)	1
Matvey Safonov (PSG)	1
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	1

DEFENDERS

Gabriel (Arsenal)	21
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	13
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	12
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	11
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	10
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	9
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	9
William Saliba (Arsenal)	9
Konrad Laimer (Bayern Munich)	8
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
Marc Guehi (Manchester City)	6
Manuel Akanji (Internazionale)	5
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	5
Matheus Nunes (Manchester City)	5
Nico Schlotterbeck (B. Dortmund)	4
Jonathan Tah (Bayern Munich)	4
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	3
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	3
Patrick Dorgu (Manchester United)	3
Jose Maria Gimenez (Atletico Madrid)	3
Piero Hincapie (Arsenal)	3
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	3
Yann Bisseck (Internazionale)	2
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	2
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	2
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Eric Garcia (Barcelona)	2
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	2
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	2
Marquinhos (PSG)	2
Willian Pacho (PSG)	2
Benjamin Pavard (Marseille)	2
Josip Stanisic (Bayern Munich)	2
Illia Zabarnyi (PSG)	2
Nayef Aguerd (Marseille)	1
Rayan Ait-Nouri (Manchester City)	1
Raul Asencio (Real Madrid)	1
Jan Bednarek (Porto)	1
Lilian Brassier (Rennes)	1
Alvaro Carreras (Real Madrid)	1
Matty Cash (Aston Villa)	1
Zeki Celik (Roma)	1
Diogo Dalot (Manchester United)	1
Sergino Dest (PSV)	1
Ousmane Diomande (Sporting)	1
Wesley Fofana (Chelsea)	1
Matteo Gabbia (Milan)	1
David Hancko (Atletico Madrid)	1
Dean Huijsen (Real Madrid)	1
Alex Jimenez (Bournemouth)	1
Ferdi Kadioglu (Brighton)	1
Milos Kerkez (Liverpool)	1
Jakub Kiwior (Porto)	1
Ezri Konsa (Aston Villa)	1
Robin Le Normand (Atletico Madrid)	1
Myles Lewis-Skelly (Arsenal)	1
Jhon Lucumi (Bologna)	1
Harry Maguire (Manchester United)	1
Noussair Mazraoui (Manchester United)	1
Moussa Niakhate (Lyon)	1
Marco Palestra (Cagliari)	1
Strahinja Pavlovic (Milan)	1
Julian Ryerson (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Marcos Senesi (Bournemouth)	1
Malick Thiaw (Newcastle United)	1
Matthieu Udol (Lens)	1
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Ben White (Arsenal)	1
Davide Zappacosta (Atalanta)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Declan Rice (Arsenal)	18
Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	15
Vitinha (PSG)	15
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	12
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	7
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	7
Lennart Karl (Bayern Munich)	6
Luka Modric (Milan)	6
Nico O'Reilly (Manchester City)	6
Pedri (Barcelona)	6
Rayan Cherki (Manchester City)	5
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	5
Martin Zubimendi (Arsenal)	5
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	4
Arda Guler (Real Madrid)	4
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	4
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	3
Eberechi Eze (Arsenal)	3
Jens Petter Hauge (Bodo/Glimt)	3
Scott McTominay (Napoli)	3
Tijjani Reijnders (Manchester City)	3
Florian Wirtz (Liverpool)	3
Christoph Baumgartner (RB Leipzig)	2
Enzo Fernandez (Chelsea)	2
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	2
Mikel Merino (Arsenal)	2
Joao Neves (PSG)	2
Felix Nmecha (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	2
Nico Paz (Como)	2
Morgan Rogers (Aston Villa)	2
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	2
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	2
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Pablo Barrios (Atletico Madrid)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Kevin De Bruyne (Napoli)	1
Nathan De Cat (Anderlecht)	1
Pape Gueye (Villarreal)	1
Weston McKennie (Juventus)	1
Richard Rios (Benfica)	1
Alexis Saelemaekers (Milan)	1
Ismael Saibari (PSV)	1
Lazar Samardzic (Atalanta)	1
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	1
Matias Soule (Roma)	1
Florian Thauvin (Lens)	1
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	1
Warren Zaire-Emery (PSG)	1

FORWARDS

Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	43
Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	40
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	25
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	13
Luis Diaz (Bayern Munich)	6
Raphinha (Barcelona)	5
Antoine Semenyo (Manchester City)	5
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	5
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	4
Julian Alvarez (Atletico Madrid)	2
Ousmane Dembele (PSG)	2
Donyell Malen (Roma)	2
Bryan Mbeumo (Manchester United)	2
David Neres (Napoli)	2
Victor Osimhen (Galatasaray)	2
Joao Pedro (Chelsea)	2
Deniz Undav (Stuttgart)	2
Kenan Yildiz (Juventus)	2
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Matheus Cunha (Manchester United)	1
Brahim Diaz (Real Madrid)	1
Yan Diomande (RB Leipzig)	1
Desire Doue (PSG)	1
Estevao (Chelsea)	1
Viktor Gyokeres (Arsenal)	1
Kasper Hogh (Bodo/Glimt)	1
Rasmus Hojlund (Napoli)	1
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	1
Ademola Lookman (Atletico Madrid)	1
Troy Parrott (AZ)	1
Vangelis Pavlidis (Benfica)	1
Marcus Rashford (Barcelona)	1
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	1
Benjamin Sesko (Manchester United)	1
Luis Suarez (Sporting)	1
Crysencio Summerville (West Ham)	1
Igor Thiago (Brentford)	1
Ferran Torres (Barcelona)	1
Can Uzun (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Ollie Watkins (Aston Villa)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker (Germany)*, *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

eye witness

Jon Bonfiglio reports

HAITI

The World Cup's most perilous nation

The kits are professional, the players unflinching, the home crowd loud, enthusiastic and eminently partisan. Watching on from the touchline, this fixture could be taking place in almost any league, in any country. But it isn't, because the context here is unique.

This is the Haitian National Football League and, while during these 90 minutes the game is the exclusive focus for 10,000 spectators, outside the stadium, nothing is normal.

The unfolding match, taking place on November 16, 2025, is between local side AS Capoise and visitors Baltimore FC. In 48 hours, the national team will be in action several hundreds of miles away in a crucial World Cup qualifier. But for now the focus is here, at the Parc Saint-Victor. Home to Capoise, the stadium lies on the steep mountain outskirts of Cap-Haitien in the north of Haiti, the most significant town in the country not yet under gang control. Opponents Baltimore, for their part, are a team from the coastal community of Saint-Marc, a little to the south, on the liminal edge of the ever-growing territory dominated by criminal groups.

Technically, both Cap-Haitien and Saint-Marc are in an area of government control. But in reality, there is no government. The last president was assassinated in 2021, and no elections have taken place since 2016. The gangs now control almost the entirety of Port-au-Prince, the capital, and with it the centre of the country, which basically means all logistics and access routes.

The United States' former Ambassador to Haiti, Pamela White, has spoken of "chaos" in the country, while British historian Alex von Tunzelmann has described the situation as being "a catastrophe beyond our worst imagination." It is impossible to understate the scale of the humanitarian and environmental disaster being suffered by the nation and its people, with more than one in ten Haitians forcibly displaced in the last few years. Inevitably, there is no sector of society that has not been affected, and soccer is no exception; the national league has been reduced, restructured and often abandoned over the preceding years.

The Haiti national team has been just as badly impacted. There has not been a home match since June 2021. In 2024, gangs seized the Stade Sylvio Cator, the country's national stadium, for no other reason than to make the point that they could, and that they were the ones now in charge of all meaningful infrastructure. If you are a heavily armed criminal group and want to make a statement about power and control, militarily taking over the country's most emblematic sporting facility sends a message that is impossible to ignore.

Once the Stade Sylvio Cator had fallen and Haiti was left without an approved venue for its World Cup qualifiers, they were forced into playing abroad, joining the likes of Ukraine and Palestine among the ranks of the sporting homeless. For the final qualifiers ahead of the 2026 World Cup, the Haitian Football Federation chose Curacao, a Dutch Caribbean island 500 miles away. Remarkably, the team's French coach, Sebastien Migne, has never visited Haiti, and seemingly has no intention of doing so; no great surprise given the complexities being lived in the country, complexities which include commercial aircraft having been hit by gunfire, mid-flight, in 2024. ▸

The World Cup's most perilous nation...a game of football on the streets of Port-au-Prince, Haiti

It is impossible to understate the scale of the humanitarian and environmental disaster being suffered by Haiti and its people

At the Parc Saint-Victor match between Capoise and Baltimore, indicators of the ongoing crisis are subtle, but present. In one corner of the stadium, a battered-looking soldier in even more battered fatigues paces near the single turnstile entrance, his rifle held at an angle. He is there because there is an impending sense of something potentially happening at any moment, but he patrols alone because there is no money to stop whatever might happen from happening, or employing anybody else to support him. Outside of the stadium, plumes of smoke rise irregularly as households burn the waste that there is no government to collect.

There is a feverish and palpable excitement, though. This is not a normal day in the Haitian football calendar, even by the abnormal standards of its last few years. There is press here from all over the country, or from wherever in the country still has something resembling free movement. Photographers have scrambled onto rooftops offering the best vantage points to the action below. At the edge of the pitch, radio and TV presenters are offering engaged commentary straight to camera. They are all here not so much for the game itself, but for the fact that Capoise and Baltimore are providing the entrée for the much more important event which is looming two days from now: Haiti v Nicaragua in the final round of World Cup qualifying.

Haiti had seemed to be out of the running just a month before, when – in matchday four of six in the CONCACAF third round Group C qualifiers – they lost 3-0 to Honduras in Tegucigalpa. It was a hugely dispiriting defeat, one that took the Hondurans clear at the top of a group in which only one team qualified automatically.

But then, in matchday five, the leaders slipped up. As Honduras suffered a shock loss away to Nicaragua, Haiti somehow snuck a 1-0 victory against Central American powerhouse Costa Rica in Willemstad, the capital of Curacao. Suddenly, the picture looked quite different. In the final round of fixtures, Haiti would face Nicaragua, needing to better Honduras' result against Costa Rica. Given top-of-the-table Honduras' pedigree, it was a long shot, but there was hope, and the feeling on the streets of the country – right across the nation, inside gang-controlled areas or out – was that this moment was needed.

But first and foremost, everybody's primary task was to find a place with an autonomous power supply to watch the match, in order to avoid the inevitable outages that continually plague the

Street party... fans celebrate as Haiti's World Cup place is secured

National hero... Haiti's goalkeeper and captain, Johny Placide

Haitian electrical grid. On most streets, the presence of broken-down and abandoned decades-old generators tells its own story. These days, petrol-powered power units have largely been replaced by solar power, the new guarantor of uninterrupted supply for those with the money and contacts to import panels from abroad.

The wealthy elite gathered in their homes with their friends, while the squeezed middle headed to the limited well-prepared bars. Those with no access to anything gathered at the Place Notre-Dame in central Cap-Haitien, where a big screen was erected, but which, minutes before kick-off, lost all power. The reaction was not just anger, but indignation, until, just a few moments later – and with the collective mood tightening – the power came back on, seconds ahead of the referee's whistle.

Within the first few minutes, Haiti's long-standing captain, goalkeeper and totem Johny Placide made what was a straightforward save, but which allowed for a collective exhalation among those gathered, an entirely necessary gasp which allowed enough oxygen for a low ripple of "Placiiiiiiiiddddeeeeee" to roll out along the crowd. Placide may have been born in France to Haitian parents, but he is a figurehead for Haitians right up there with the "Father of Haiti", independence hero Toussaint Louverture. In France, Placide plays for Ligue 2 club Bastia, but in Haiti he is the premium sporting figure, without equal.

By half-time, the power was miraculously still on, Haiti were two goals to the good, Honduras and Costa Rica was still locked at 0-0, and grown men were being held upright by friends or lampposts, awaiting the expected punch in the guts which Haitians are all-too-used to receiving as retribution for dreaming of a better future. But the punch wasn't to come. Not this time.

For Haiti, and Haitians everywhere, this was proving to be a fever dream.

In the last 200 years, this unique nation had suffered more devastating earthquakes and hurricanes than it's possible to mention, seen dictators and secret police remove loved ones in the dead of night, lived cholera epidemics and watched the US military invading to steal Haitian gold in 1914. All damned moments, little doubt, but all of which were superseded by one particular instant, when in 1825 the French sent a gunboat to Haiti to force compensation payments for lost revenue, supposedly due when Haiti rose up in independence and freed its own slaves. Haiti would not finish paying its "independence debt" until 1947, by which point it had reached the equivalent of half a billion US dollars, crippling the country's economic development for generations.

In the second half against Nicaragua, although none of this mattered, it was the context that drove the hope. The crowds, in fact, had largely stopped watching the screens, the pain of keeping their eyes on the action proving too great.

The minutes ticked on, Honduras still failed to score, and in neither match did anything tangible occur, as though the enormity of the situation had frozen all action. Until somewhere, far away, on that Dutch island in the southern Caribbean, a referee blew his whistle to signal the end of proceedings.

In Haiti, thunder ripped through the night, rain followed in a snap, and all power was lost, wherever it came from. Delirium. Waste flowed down streets, people gambolled barefoot, their eyes dancing.

There's an old line in Haiti that says that no matter how bad things are, that they can only get worse. Not that time; not that night. For once, for a moment, everything got better. And the result, a first appearance at a World Cup since 1974, means that this summer the country and its people will have the chance for more temporary respite and to revel yet again.

Underdogs...Haiti have been drawn alongside Brazil, Morocco and Scotland in Group C

eye witness

Luke Entwistle reports

FRANCE

Modest but proud, or rich on their knees?

How Strasbourg fans have dealt with the rise of their team under their BlueCo owners

After a 1-1 draw with Ligue 1 title challengers Lens, Strasbourg head coach Gary O'Neil was asked if his team are now competing with the big boys. "I think so," he responded. It was the final game of an infernal run for the French club, which had seen them play all of Ligue 1's top five teams (at the time of writing) in the space of just six games. Across those five fixtures, Strasbourg had lost just once, against Paris Saint-Germain, and had taken eight points from a possible 15, beating the likes of Lille and Lyon, while also drawing away to Marseille.

Given that just two years ago the club were mired in a relegation battle, you would expect the supporters to be elated. Far from it.

"We would rather a modest but proud Racing than a rich one on its knees," read a banner unfurled by

Strasbourg's ultras earlier this season. There is newfound competitiveness and wealth at Strasbourg, but it has come at a cost that many of the club's supporters are not willing to accept.

In 2022, BlueCo, led by Todd Boehly, was formed in order to buy Chelsea FC from Roman Abramovich. Just a year later, in the summer of 2023, the consortium added Racing Club de Strasbourg Alsace to their portfolio.

For some fans of the French club, "portfolio" is certainly the right phrase – the French word for multi-club ownership is "*multipropriété*", which can also be translated as "timeshare". The system allows clubs to be treated like a holiday home, an asset, one that, according to Alexandre Hummel, a member of the Strasbourg Supporters' Club, is subservient.

"The owners, BlueCo, as soon as they spoke about [buying] a club in France, for them it was to make a 'farm team', if we are speaking in American terms," he tells *World Soccer*. "The project was clear from the start."

The "fundamental opposition" from the Strasbourg ultras, Hummel says, is ideological. They are against the rise of multi-club ownership, which is becoming increasingly common, especially in France, as Premier League clubs seek to profit from the rich hotbed of talent across the English Channel.

It also provides English clubs with the option of sending their own players to play in France, a league that most closely replicates the athleticism and physicality of the Premier League.

It is the perilous financial situation in France that makes many of its clubs easy prey. Strasbourg are a club familiar with financial ruin, having gone bankrupt as recently as 2011. Bought by club legend Marc Keller for a symbolic €1 in 2012, *Le Racing* fought back from the fifth tier to return to Ligue 1 in 2017. Keller recently explained his decision to sell to BlueCo. "Every year that passed, we reached a ceiling," he told *RMC Sport*, while also citing the reduction of clubs in Ligue 1 from 20 to 18 as a reason for increased fear of relegation.

But for many associated with the club, the new era under BlueCo marks too much of a radical departure from the one that preceded it. "His choice is contestable," says Hummel of Keller's decision to sell to BlueCo.

Inside the premises of the Federation of Strasbourg Supporters is a wall of pictures showing previous visits from players, executives

***"Non a la multipropriete"*...Strasbourg fans unveil an anti-MCO banner**

and even Keller himself, who has remained at the club as president. "Since [the club went bankrupt], there was a link that was a lot stronger between the club and its supporters," says RCSA supporter Vincent Fredel. That link has now gone.

The end of the "very, very close relationship" between the club and its supporters is strikingly visual on this wall because the photos simply...stop. The last picture is of the fans and then-Strasbourg manager Patrick Vieira on September 19, 2023, just a couple of months after BlueCo's takeover.

Strasbourg is the official seat of the European Parliament and, fittingly, there have been attempts at diplomacy in order to bridge the divide. Those attempts, however, have failed. "Unfortunately, we realised that, even on the subject of supporters, what they are allowed to say and do, nothing is decided at Strasbourg, absolutely nothing," says Hummel. "Even the small details are micromanaged in London."

Not only that, there are now claims of censorship, too. In late February ultras brought a banner to the match against Lyon which read: "Chelsea don't decide what happens at Racing. 1.09.24", a reference to a quote from Keller. The banner was not allowed into the Meinau stadium, according to local media. "It aggravates the situation a lot," says Hummel. "We are subjected to censorship, which we find completely absurd, but we are obliged to respect it."

Despite that, in the match against

Marc Keller... Strasbourg's club president and former player

"BlueCo out"... another banner inside Strasbourg's Stade de la Meinau

Lens at the end of February, there were still anti-multi-club banners in the Kop. "For a Racing independent, of the people, and different," read one. "No to multi-club ownership," quite simply read another. As has become tradition, the ultras went "on strike" for the start of the game, remaining silent for the first 15 minutes.

That strike, however, does not have unanimous support within the Meinau. "There has been a fracture," admits Fredel. "There is a strike at the start of the matches. The Kop doesn't chant, but then the Kop starts to chant, and the other stands don't necessarily follow." Fredel, however, dismisses the notion of "tension" between the ultras and the rest of the fans, preferring the word "disagreement".

Fredel speaks of an improvement in this relationship this season, despite events hardening the stance of the ultras yet further. In September, just after the start of the season, Emmanuel Emegha, freshly named club captain, posed with a Chelsea shirt, announcing his move to Stamford Bridge for the following season. "It didn't surprise us but it shocked us," says Hummel. "I think for a lot of people, it was a rude shock because they realised the way things could go."

There was also the sudden departure of head coach Liam Rosenior in January and then that of vice-captain Mamadou Sarr on transfer deadline day. Both joined – or in Sarr's case, re-joined – the mother ship project at Chelsea. For Strasbourg's ultras, those moves confirmed the belief that they had long since held.

"At first, it was the refusal of multi-club ownership, a refusal in principle without necessarily lots of things [happening] at the stadium," explains Hummel. "Since 2024 a contestation that has become more radical as we began to realise that, essentially, we were in the most vertical form, the harshest form of multi-club ownership that there is, the relegation to the rank of a reserve team."

It would be reasonable to expect that this fracture would give rise to a certain ambivalence from the supporters. Not in the slightest. The premises of the Federation of Supporters are as lively as ever, filled with fans sporting their club's colours before heading for the evening's match, just a couple of hundred metres away at the Meinau. Despite the strike, the atmosphere is far from flat, and once that strike ends, there is a fresh energy, one that reaches the pitch and the players, with Joaquin Panichelli's opener for Strasbourg coming less than three minutes after the Kop burst into full voice.

> "The harshest form of multi-club ownership that there is, the relegation to the rank of a reserve team"
>
> **Strasbourg Supporters' Club member Alexandre Hummel**

Even over an hour after the final whistle of a game that ended in a 1-1 draw, there are still hundreds of supporters milling around the stadium and eating and drinking in the fanzone. Despondency and fervour can – and do – coexist. The fans and the club are still in a relationship, but it is complicated.

That still rings partially true for the less radical supporters, with many seduced by the project, which has delivered European football and has Strasbourg fighting to finish in the top half of the league table. "At the start, I was very reticent, but they have put in the means for Strasbourg to perform," says Fredel. "I am not completely happy or completely unhappy. I'm in two minds." There is an admission that, for many RCSA fans, the teams of the past two years are the best to have graced the sacred Meinau turf.

Hummel, though, looks beyond that: "When we are supporters, results are obviously important. But if we only cared about the results, we wouldn't be supporters. If the results were the be-all and end-all, we wouldn't have been there in the fifth tier.

"Obviously, we understand that people are seduced by the team, and it's true that, in a way, the team is seductive. But will it still be here in a year? In two, five, or ten years? We also have a responsibility. It is the club of our parents, of our grandparents, of their grandparents. This club has to exist in 20 or 30 years, and there are big worries [about that] at the moment."

Being "thrown" between neighbouring Germany, less than five kilometres from the Stade de la Meinau, and France in recent centuries has created a strong sense of what it means to be Alsace. "If you look at the history of Racing since its creation in 1906, it is the story of Alsace, the fact of being thrown about between the two [countries]. In fact, you're not only buying a club, but a regional symbol," says Hummel.

Lens' supporters showed sympathy with RCSA's situation, unveiling a banner of their own in the away end: "Multi-club ownership is a plague". And like a plague, multi-club ownership is spreading, especially in France. Bill Foley's Black Knight Football Club counts Lorient among its stable, ESTAC Troyes in Ligue 2 are part of the City Football Group, while Aston Villa's owners have links to second-tier Annecy.

At the Meinau, there is a resistance to the modern phenomenon, but not one that compromises their love of the club.

Whisked away...Strasbourg captain Emmanuel Emegha will join Chelsea in the summer

eyewitness

Vladimir Novak reports

SERBIA

Stankovic resumes Red Star dominance in Eternal Derby

With their former coach back in the dugout, Red Star came out on top once again in the latest Belgrade Derby against Partizan

The build-up to the 178th league Belgrade Derby between Red Star and Partizan, often dubbed the "Eternal Derby", was quite strange. The unwritten rule of this rivalry – or indeed, any grudge match – says that form goes out of the window and there is never a favourite, especially when one side is just a point above the other at the top of the table. Yet in spite of all that, before this game everyone – fans, media, bookmakers – was convinced that Red Star would win.

Even so, as ever, the match was anticipated with much excitement and the stands of Red Star's Rajko Mitic Stadium were packed. The pitch was perfect and the weather ideal – no rain and 10°C – ahead of the 5pm kick-off. Due to security measures, to isolate Partizan ultras, the ground's capacity was reduced from 51,755 to around 40,000.

Looking around the ground ahead of kick-off, the most noticeable thing was the number of young, foreign football fans in attendance. From Germany, Austria, Poland, Greece, Italy, North Macedonia and beyond, plenty of football enthusiasts had made the trip in order to have a first-hand experience of the fiery atmosphere at an Eternal Derby.

For those who enjoy a hostile, intimidating atmosphere, the Belgrade Derby is the right place to be. Whether at the "Marakana", as Red Star's home ground is popularly nicknamed, or at the Partizan Stadium, you'll experience an atmosphere that can only be compared to local derbies in Istanbul, Athens or Rome – both in a positive and a negative sense.

Like, for example, in the tenth minute, when Partizan hooligans ripped out seats and hurled them at Red Star's attacking midfielder Vasilije Kostov, who was about to take a corner-kick. Fortunately, Kostov wasn't hit by any of those "missiles".

There was perhaps some karmic justice in the fact that Partizan were punished for that incident. Without that interruption, Red Star would not have had time to take the lead in the last action of the four minutes of first-half stoppage time. And it was Kostov himself who dealt the blow, converting a fine cross by Aleksandar Katai with a well-placed header to become the youngest goalscorer in the history of the derby at the age of 17 years, nine months and 11 days.

Red Star ultras celebrated the goal in typically explosive fashion, igniting a festival of pyrotechnics, red flares, firecrackers and even an actual firework.

It was a deserved 1-0 lead. Red Star were the better team and, as well as the goal itself, had created two good chances, both denied by Partizan goalkeeper Marko Milosevic. The visitors had only one real effort of note, but Vanja Dragojevic's shot with his weaker left foot was saved by Red Star's Brazilian goalkeeper Matheus.

The Eternal Derby...
Red Star v Partizan

Early in the second half, those tourists who had come to see the fiery atmosphere got the chance to witness a real fire in the stadium. Partizan's ultras – who delivered their usual abusive slogans against the Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic, a declared Red Star supporter – not only ripped out a bunch of seats but also set some on fire. As the fire in the stands grew bigger, referee Pavle Ilic was forced to stop the game. Firefighters extinguished the fire and, after an interruption of around ten minutes, the match resumed. It says a lot for the violent history of the rivalry that, compared with previous Belgrade Derbies, this one could still be described as relatively "peaceful".

Upon the second half's resumption, it was as if only one team had emerged from the changing rooms. By the final whistle, Partizan could be relieved to have escaped without suffering a heavier defeat.

In the 56th minute, Marko Arnautovic made it 2-0 with a precise shot from the edge of the penalty area, his fourth league goal of the season. The Austria forward joined the club last summer, fulfilling a promise that he had made to his friend and former manager, the late Sinisa Mihajlovic. This goal was arguably his best moment in a red-and-white shirt so far, and his emotional celebration was one of the game's most poignant images.

Back in the hot seat... Red Star head coach Dejan Stankovic

In the 77th minute, Arnautovic was involved again, sparking a smart combination move that would lead to the third goal. The 36-year-old former Internazionale, Stoke City and West Ham United striker played the ball to Kostov in the box and the youngster flicked it with a first-time backheel to Katai who stroked the ball home.

It was a fitting reward for a dominant performance. Yet the game could easily have swung in a different direction; at 2-0 down, Partizan had the chance to make it 2-1 from the penalty spot.

It was a bizarre incident as there was not even remotely a goal chance. In the 68th minute, Kostov cleared away a harmless cross, but in doing so brought down Nikola Simic, who had his back to goal trying to receive the ball on the edge of the penalty box. Simic stayed down, but the play continued. After an intervention by VAR, Partizan were awarded a penalty – much to the dismay of the home supporters.

Fiery rivalry...Partizan ultras set fire to seats in the away end of the Marakana

Playmaker Milan Vukotic stepped up. The Montenegro international impressed in the early stages of this season after joining Partizan from Buducnost Podgorica, but his recent form had taken a hit. Here was his chance to rediscover his edge.

The penalty was struck low to the left, but Matheus guessed correctly, dived to his right-hand side and saved it. Centre-forward Andrej Kostic picked up the rebound and hammered the ball into the net but, while Partizan fans celebrated, there was another VAR check. With half of his boot over the 18-yard line, Kostic was adjudged to have encroached into the box, and the goal was disallowed – this time to the delight of the home crowd.

That was the height of controversy – much to the relief of referee Ilic. In the build-up to the game, after the decision was made for him to officiate the derby, Partizan issued a statement saying they found the appointment unacceptable, that they had been unhappy with his refereeing not only in previous derbies but also in other matches. In response, Red Star issued a statement of their own, claiming "whining and crying is Partizan's trademark." The war of words continued with Partizan describing Red Star's reply as "cheap rhetoric provocation and nonsensical constructions".

Thankfully, Partizan's fears of biased refereeing were unfounded.

At the final whistle, there were ovations for Dejan Stankovic following his first derby since returning to the club as head coach in late December. In his first spell at the helm, between 2019 and 2022, the former midfielder won three consecutive titles, before departing for spells with Sampdoria, Ferencvaros and Spartak Moscow. So far, his second stint at the Marakana has continued as if he never went away: seven wins out of nine, with the only defeat coming against Lille in the second leg of the Europa League knockout round play-offs. For Belgrade-born Stankovic, there is no doubt that the most precious of those victories was the triumph against rivals Partizan.

> "It's wonderful to return to the place where you used to be as a kid. One lives for such moments"
>
> **Red Star head coach Dejan Stankovic**

"It's wonderful to return to the place where you used to be as a kid," said an emotional Stankovic at the press conference after the game. "One lives for such moments."

In terms of quality, there have been much poorer derbies than this one in recent years. Still, it would be flattering to say that it was a great game. After all, a good game requires two strong teams, and Partizan, on this occasion, were far from equal competitors. In the end, Red Star's billing as big pre-match favourites was more than justified.

Partizan were not just up against a big gap in terms of on-field quality, they also had plenty of problems off the field. On the morning immediately after the match, Partizan head coach Nenad Stojakovic was sacked. Reportedly he had been close to being fired a couple of weeks before the derby, only for the club's vice-president Predrag Mijatovic to decide that he should stay on.

Former Real Madrid star Mijatovic, who had worked as sports director for the Spanish giants, returned to Partizan in late 2024 to much excitement and optimism. There were high hopes that he would help turn things around and bring the glory days back to the club.

But the honeymoon period didn't last long. This derby defeat – their sixth in the last seven league head-to-heads with Red Star – left Partizan four points adrift of their historic rivals, and staring down the barrel of a ninth season without a league title.

As for Red Star, this was their 72nd league victory against Partizan – 24 more than their rivals, the biggest gap in the 79-year history of the Eternal Derby. While there is still plenty of football to be played this season, there was little doubt in the wake of this result that Red Star look like cruising to yet another league title – their ninth in a row, 12th since the Serbian Superliga began in 2006 and 36th overall. Partizan, on eight Serbian crowns and 27 in total, are falling further behind.

The balance of footballing power in Belgrade has never been more one-sided – and there is no sign of that changing any time soon.

Emotional celebration...Red Star forward Marko Arnautovic celebrates his decisive Belgrade Derby goal

WORLD CUP WATCH

Jamie Evans takes a closer look at how the World Cup preparations are shaping up ahead of March's international break

1 BRAZIL LEGENDS PUSHING FOR WORLD CUP RECALL

Neymar has made it clear that he wants to play at this summer's World Cup, and in February he completed his return from knee surgery. Santos' hectic schedule over the next few months – they have games in the Sao Paulo Championship, Brazilian league and Copa Sudamericana to negotiate – will give **Brazil**'s record scorer plenty of opportunities to prove his form and fitness. And a return would be welcomed by many after Real Madrid winger Rodrygo was ruled out of the finals with an ACL injury.

And Neymar is not the only Brazilian veteran eyeing a comeback. Centre-back Thiago Silva, now 41, joined Porto from Fluminense in January with the intention of impressing head coach Carlo Ancelotti and has settled quickly at the Portuguese giants. Ancelotti, though, is not only focused on this summer. Having agreed a new contract ahead of the friendlies against France and Croatia, keeping him in post until 2030, he is looking to the future – and that could spell trouble for Neymar and Thiago Silva's hopes of a recall.

2 JAPAN'S INJURY CRISIS

It has been a bad few weeks for **Japan** internationals who have signed for Liverpool. Wataru Endo, the Reds' combative midfielder and Samurai Blue captain, sustained a serious ankle injury in the Premier League clash with Sunderland in mid-February, just weeks after his international team-mate and former Anfield forward Takumi Minamino had torn his ACL while in action for Monaco. Both are major doubts for this summer's finals, presenting the team with a potential leadership vacuum – Minamino tends to wear the captain's armband when Endo is absent.

There could be some good fitness news for Japan head coach Hajime Moriyasu, though, in the form of Takehiro Tomiyasu. The experienced, versatile ex-Arsenal defender joined Ajax at the end of last year after an injury-plagued spell in North London, and made his return to action in February.

3 PULISIC RETURNS FOR THE STARS AND STRIPES

USA captain Christian Pulisic faced a fair amount of criticism when he skipped November's friendlies against Paraguay and Uruguay in order to concentrate on recovering from a troublesome hamstring injury. Critics argued that nobody, not even the team's talisman, should be able to pick and choose their games, but all will be forgiven if he can prove that he's fully fit and firing in the upcoming clashes with Belgium and Portugal.

With striker Ricardo Pepi set to miss the games with a broken arm, there will also be opportunities for the team's other attacking options. Monaco's Folarin Balogun is the standout candidate after becoming the highest-scoring American in a UEFA Champions League season with five goals this campaign, while Toronto FC new boy Josh Sargent will also come into the reckoning. But there are contenders in the EFL Championship as well, with Coventry City's Haji Wright and Derby County's Patrick Agyemang also among the goals recently.

4 JAMES FINDS A CLUB

Colombia head coach Nestor Lorenzo will have breathed a huge sigh of relief after his talismanic playmaker finally resolved his club future. James Rodriguez was in limbo after his contract at Mexican side Leon concluded at the end of 2025, but after a flurry of rumours he finally settled on MLS side Minnesota United.

Elsewhere, having played in MLS, England, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, *Los Cafeteros* striker Jhon Duran already had the CV of a journeyman at the end of his career before his latest move, a loan to Zenit. The 22-year-old will be hoping to recapture the form that made him one of the Premier League's most exciting young talents just two years ago.

5 NEUER RULES OUT GERMANY COMEBACK

Legendary goalkeeper Manuel Neuer opted to hang up his international gloves after Euro 2024. In his long-term understudy Marc-Andre ter Stegen, **Germany** seemed to have a ready-made replacement, but the 33-year-old, who joined Girona on loan from Barcelona in January, looks likely to miss the finals with a hamstring injury. However, any talk of Neuer emulating his old team-mate Toni Kroos and coming out of retirement for one final tournament was quickly quashed by the Bayern Munich man. Instead, he backed the current incumbent, Oliver Baumann, telling *Bild*: "He is now number one and he is doing his job very well."

6 REGRAGUI EXITS

Despite a World Cup semi-final appearance four years ago and an AFCON final earlier this year, **Morocco** ended Walid Regragui's time as head coach a little over three months before their World Cup campaign starts against Brazil in New Jersey.

In January, the Atlas Lions climbed to eighth in the FIFA rankings, their highest position. But after the performances in Qatar, and given the scale of investment in the country's football scene, Regragui was also operating with record levels of expectation.

His replacement, Mohamed Ouahbi, led the youth team to the Under-20 World Cup last year and could turn to some of the players from that victorious campaign in Chile as he ushers in a new era. His priority position is in defence, where former captain Romain Saiss has just announced his international retirement while another experienced centre-back, Adam Masina, is a free agent after being released by Torino.

The new era will begin with friendlies against Ecuador and Paraguay.

7 HAITI EYEING EDOUARD

Smaller countries recruiting from their diaspora will be a recurring theme at this World Cup, and **Haiti** have got in on the act by targeting former Celtic and Crystal Palace man Odsonne Edouard. Now playing for Ligue 1 high flyers Lens, the striker was born in French Guiana, part of Caribbean South America, and grew up in Paris, but is eligible for Haiti through his parents. The 28-year-old had a sensational scoring record for France's youth sides, registering 49 goals in 55 games, including 17 in 14 for the Under-21s, but has never been called up for *Les Bleus'* senior side.

8 O'REILLY ADDS TO ENGLAND'S MIDFIELD HEADACHE

Who should line up as **England**'s first-choice attacking midfielder has been one of the most persistent debates of the Thomas Tuchel regime. Aston Villa playmaker Morgan Rogers, an outsider at the start of qualifying, put himself in pole position with a string of impressive performances. His rival in chief, Jude Bellingham, has been troubled by injuries this season and may not even take part in the March friendlies against Uruguay and Japan. To add further complications, Nico O'Reilly, a strong candidate for the left-back role, threw his hat into the ring for consideration further forward by scoring an impressive brace while operating as a No.10 in Manchester City's 2-1 win over Newcastle United in February. With the likes of Eberechi Eze, Cole Palmer and Phil Foden waiting in the wings, Tuchel is spoilt for choice.

9 RUUD RETURNS

Out of work since departing Leicester City at the end of the 2024-25 campaign, Ruud van Nistelrooy has joined the **Netherlands**' coaching staff for the World Cup under Ronald Koeman. This will be the ex-PSV coach and former Manchester United caretaker manager's third spell in the role, first assisting Guus Hiddink for two years in the build-up to Euro 2016 and then Frank de Boer at the following European Championship. His World Cup experience, though, is limited to playing at the 2006 finals in Germany when he fell out with his manager Marco van Basten and was subsequently frozen out of the team.

10 JORDAN'S ATTACKING TRIDENT BECOMES A SPEAR

Jordan's hopes of impressing on their World Cup debut had already taken a hit after forward Yazan Al Naimat sustained an ACL injury that could rule him out of the finals, but that was compounded by the news that his fellow attacker, Ali Olwan, also faces a race to be fit for the summer due to an ankle injury. The duo make up two thirds of the attacking trident that has led Jordan on their impressive performances of recent years, but Mousa Al Tamari is now the only fit member of the trio. The upcoming home friendlies against Costa Rica and Nigeria will give Jordan coach Jamal Sellami the chance to take a look at his back-up options.

11 PANAMA'S BIG HOPE

Only two **Panama** players have ever played in Brazil's top flight. The first, defender Felipe Baloy, went on to make World Cup history in 2018 by scoring his country's first-ever goal in the competition. The second is also set to make Panamanian history, as the youngest star to play for the Central American country at the World Cup. Kadir Barria was only 17 when Botafogo spotted him, and he hit a match-winning brace on his first start for the club in November. Two months later, he made his international bow in a friendly against Bolivia, scoring in the 1-1 draw. It's early days, but Panama believe they have a future star in their ranks.

12 TUNISIA CHOOSE LAMOUCHI

Having guided **Tunisia** to the World Cup, head coach Sami Trabelsi paid the price for a last-16 AFCON elimination and was sacked in January. To replace him, the Tunisian Football Federation turned to ex-Ivory Coast boss Sabri Lamouchi, who led the Elephants to the 2014 World Cup. That was his last taste of international football. Since then, he has worked for Rennes, Nottingham Forest, Cardiff City and a host of clubs in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. His first press conference suggests that he will need to win over the local media: as well as being quizzed on why he'd chosen to play international football for France rather than the Carthage Eagles, he also described Tunisia's domestic league as "boring". His first games will be friendlies in Canada, against Haiti and the World Cup co-hosts themselves. Joining him in his backroom staff is Wahbi Khazri, the team's attacking star at the last two World Cups, who retired in December.

13 MEXICO'S QUINONES DEBATE

Colombian-born winger Julian Quinones has had a stop-start international career for **Mexico**. A star of Liga MX with Tigres, Lobos, Atlas and America, he switched his international allegiance in 2023, yet has never consistently held down a place in the first XI for *El Tri*. He was left out of all three of the CONCACAF Gold Cup and Nations League finals that the team has reached in his time, and has failed to score in his last 12 appearances, albeit many of those were cameos off the bench. In contrast, his club form for Al Qadsiah has been outstanding, with 22 goals in his first 21 Saudi Pro League games of 2025-26 – including a run of 11 in eight. His critics say his impressive club form hasn't translated to the international stage, while his supporters say he gets a rough ride from the Mexican media and selectors because he is naturalised. Upcoming friendlies with Portugal and Belgium could give him the chance to prove his worth.

14 SON CLOSING IN ON RECORD

Son Heung-min's place in **South Korea**'s record books is already secured. The eight-time Korean Player of the Year is the Taegeuk Warriors' most capped player with 140 appearances, but the 33-year-old is also closing in on his nation's scoring record. Another goal against Bolivia in November took him to 54 for his country, four short of the record held by Cha Bum-kun. Yet with the Los Angeles FC forward expected to retire from the national team this summer, he is running out of time. A good start to the 2026 MLS season, though, suggests he is well placed to do it.

15 ARGENTINA'S SUPPORTING CAST

Argentina used the fewest players and had the third-oldest squad of any South America team in World Cup qualifying, suggesting that the side is ripe for some fresh blood. Yet with a genuine prize on the line in the upcoming Finalissima clash with Spain, there is limited opportunity for head coach Lionel Scaloni to experiment.

Of the players knocking on the door, Nico Paz is surely top of the list. The outstanding young Como midfielder has six caps but only two of those came from the start. Another player keen to strengthen his credentials is Joaquin Panichelli. The 23-year-old is a classic centre-forward who has been in excellent form for Strasbourg and made his international debut in November.

16 CARNEY FOR AUSTRIA

Carney Chukwuemeka had his choice of playing international football for **Austria**, France, Nigeria or England, and won the U19 European Championship with the latter in 2022, earning a spot in the Team of the Tournament for his performances. But with no senior Three Lions caps to his name, Austria are working on a switch of allegiance ahead of this summer's finals. A graduate of Aston Villa's academy, the midfielder left Chelsea for Borussia Dortmund in 2025 and has been a regular for the German giants this season. The 22-year-old should be a good fit in Ralf Rangnick's energetic, high-pressing side.

17 OVERY'S RAPID RISE

Two years ago, Manchester United's James Overy was playing in the tenth tier of English football but now looks set for the World Cup. The 18-year-old is still waiting for his first **Australia** cap but that should come soon enough after the Socceroos' first-choice right-back, Blackburn Rovers' Lewis Miller, was ruled out of the finals with an Achilles injury.

Still, there are encouraging signs elsewhere in the English Championship for the Socceroos: Mohamed Toure has settled in quickly at Norwich City, while former Bayern Munich winger Nestory Irankunda continues to torment full-backs for promotion-chasing Watford.

19 NEW STARTS FOR OLD GUARD

The January transfer window saw some of **Canada**'s elder statesmen embark on new challenges ahead of co-hosting this summer's finals. Cyle Larin, formerly the country's record goalscorer, called time on an unsuccessful loan at Feyenoord and switched instead to Southampton in the Championship. The team's vice-captain, midfielder Stephen Eustaquio, also moved on loan, this time from Porto to MLS side LAFC. And the team's oldest player, Junior Hoilett, quit Hibernian to play regular football at League Two side Swindon Town, a move that was endorsed by Canada head coach Jesse Marsch.

18 ADVOCAAT QUITS CURACAO

Preparations for **Curacao**'s first-ever World Cup took a knock in February with the announcement that their hugely experienced head coach Dick Advocaat would be stepping down from the role. Dutch media reported that the 78-year-old, who would have become the oldest manager in World Cup history, walked away from the position due to his daughter's health. "I've always said family is above football," he said, "but, of course, that doesn't change the fact that I'm going to miss Curacao, the people there and my colleagues very much." His replacement is another Dutchman, Fred Rutten, a former PSV manager whose last permanent position was as Ruud van Nistelrooy's assistant in Eindhoven.

20 BARNES RULES OUT SCOTLAND

Newcastle United's Harvey Barnes was first linked with playing for **Scotland** in 2023, when head coach Steve Clarke admitted that he had reached out to the one-cap England winger. That talk was dialled up after the Scots booked their place at the World Cup with a 4-2 victory over Denmark in November, but was put to bed by Clarke in February. "I can say for sure, Harvey's going to concentrate on trying to play for England, he's not going to come to Scotland," Clarke told *BBC Radio 5 Live*. "Nobody needs to ask me or Harvey about it any more."

Now, Clarke's focus should be on finding an alternative. Of his current squad, only Ben Gannon-Doak possesses the pace and ball-carrying ability to get the team up the pitch, and the Bournemouth man was missed after going off injured inside the first 22 minutes against the Danes. Barnes would have provided a remedy to that.

21 GHANA EYEING ENGLAND CAST-OFFS

Scotland are not the only country to have looked into recruiting players with an England cap to their name. **Ghana** have courted Eddie Nketiah, the record goalscorer for England's Under-21s, for many years and, with the Crystal Palace striker looking unlikely to add to his solitary senior Three Lions cap, which he collected in 2023, the Black Stars may finally get their man. Nottingham Forest winger Callum Hudson-Odoi, who won three senior England caps under Gareth Southgate in 2019, is also in their sights, as is his fellow Chelsea academy graduate Josh Acheampong. The defender, 19, has played for England at youth level almost 50 times, and made his Under-21s bow in September, but the allure of a World Cup could prove tempting. Ghana's squad already has a number of English-born players including Antoine Semenyo, Tariq Lamptey, Jerome Opoku and Brandon Thomas-Asante.

22 PEPE ON THE COMEBACK TRAIL ▲

Ivory Coast are blessed with a coterie of exciting wingers – led by RB Leipzig starlet Yan Diomande (see page 52) – yet their most experienced option in that area of the pitch, ex-Arsenal man Nicolas Pepe, was left out of the Elephants' 2025 AFCON squad. "If we were going strictly by sporting criteria, he would be with us," said head coach Emerse Fae cryptically.

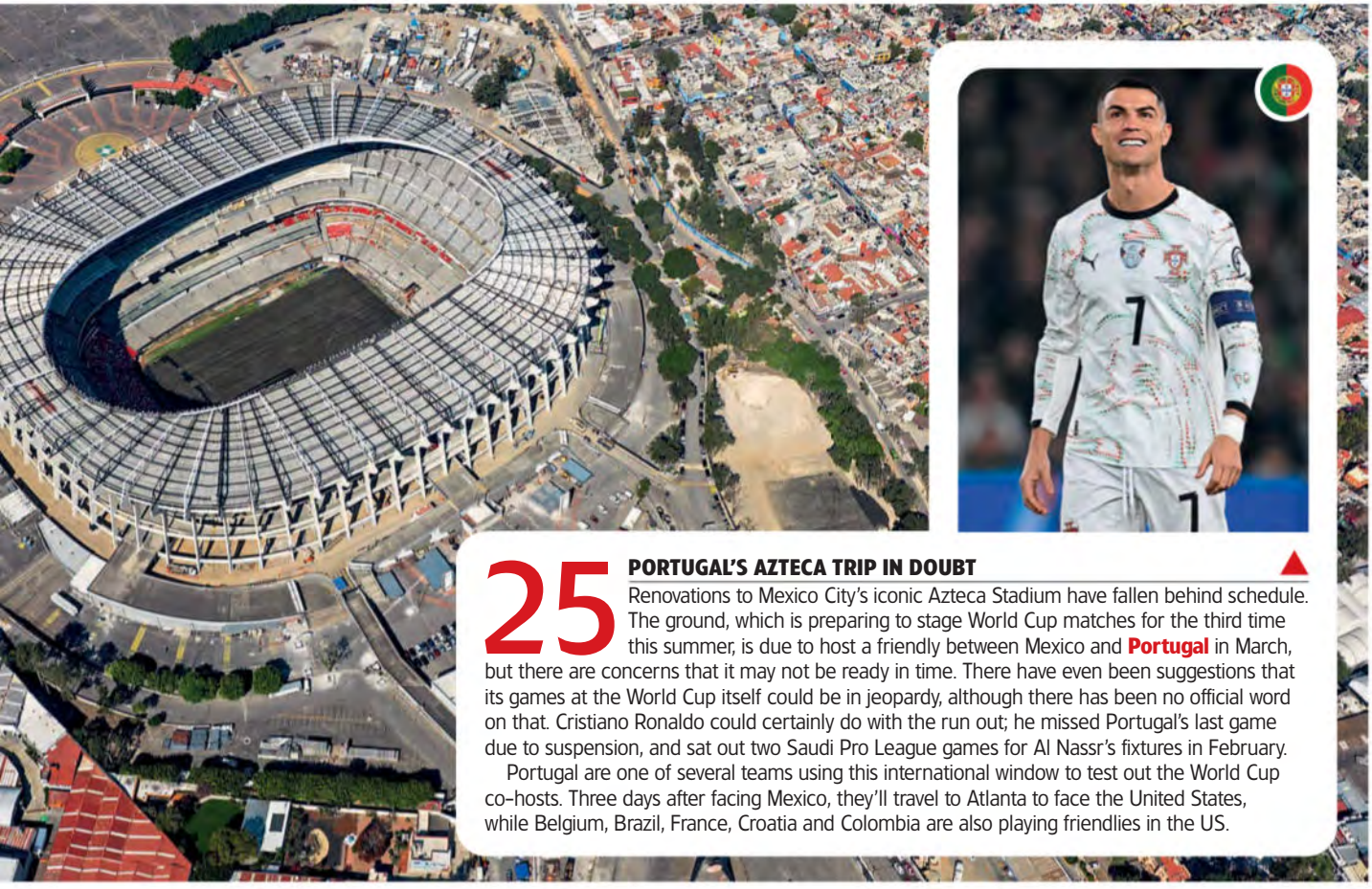
The question is, at what point does his form become too good to ignore? The 30-year-old's mature and consistent displays for high-flying Villarreal, combined with the knowhow of his 52 caps, means he is surely worth persevering with.

23 ANOTHER VICTOR VALDES? ▼

Joan Garcia has a fair claim to being the best goalkeeper in La Liga right now. Many pundits in **Spain** have certainly claimed so, and not without evidence; Barcelona's high line means that their keeper is kept busier than most. Even in his side's 2-1 defeat to Girona in February, Garcia was named Man of the Match. And yet, in spite of his form, and his 2024 Olympic gold medal, Garcia is still waiting for his first senior cap. It brings to mind the experience of former Barca keeper Victor Valdes, who won two Champions Leagues and three Zamora trophies before his first Spain caps. *La Roja* boss Luis de la Fuente has remained loyal to Euro 2024 winner Unai Simon, but Garcia is surely too good to be ignored.

24 URUGUAY STRIKER CRISIS GOES ON ▲

Uruguay boss Marcelo Bielsa already had a big headache in attack, with his side lacking an outstanding centre-forward. To make matters worse, his most high-profile option, Darwin Nunez, was left out of Al Hilal's Saudi Pro League squad for the rest of this season, having failed to make an impression since arriving from Liverpool last summer. He remains eligible for the AFC Champions League, where there are fewer limits on foreign players, but nonethless Uruguay's upcoming friendlies with England and Algeria present a valuable opportunity for the 26-year-old to get some game time.



25 PORTUGAL'S AZTECA TRIP IN DOUBT ▲

Renovations to Mexico City's iconic Azteca Stadium have fallen behind schedule. The ground, which is preparing to stage World Cup matches for the third time this summer, is due to host a friendly between Mexico and **Portugal** in March, but there are concerns that it may not be ready in time. There have even been suggestions that its games at the World Cup itself could be in jeopardy, although there has been no official word on that. Cristiano Ronaldo could certainly do with the run out; he missed Portugal's last game due to suspension, and sat out two Saudi Pro League games for Al Nassr's fixtures in February.

Portugal are one of several teams using this international window to test out the World Cup co-hosts. Three days after facing Mexico, they'll travel to Atlanta to face the United States, while Belgium, Brazil, France, Croatia and Colombia are also playing friendlies in the US.

23 UPCOMING COACHES

Mark Gleeson, James Nalton, Nick Bidwell, Tim Vickery and John Duerden take a closer look at the most promising managerial talents from around the world

In the summer of 2024, some of the biggest clubs in world football changed their coaches. Liverpool said an emotional goodbye to Jurgen Klopp and hired Arne Slot, Bayern Munich replaced Thomas Tuchel with Vincent Kompany, and Barcelona fired legendary midfielder Xavi in favour of another ex-Bayern manager, Hansi Flick.

Two years on, and we could be in for another summer on the managerial merry-go-round. Real Madrid and Manchester United, arguably the two biggest clubs in the world, both have decisions to make on who will lead them next season. At Italy's biggest clubs, Juventus, Milan and Inter, no manager is ever safe, while rumours abound about the long-term future of Pep Guardiola at Manchester City. Even Slot and Flick, despite both lifting league titles last season, find themselves under pressure at Anfield and Camp Nou respectively, showing just how ruthless this business can be.

Amidst all this uncertainty, we tasked our network of global football experts with identifying the best up-and-coming coaching talents from around the world. Some are fresh-faced rookies, others have been around a little longer, but all of them have the talent, ambition and momentum to make a bigger name for themselves over the next 12 months.

Jamie Evans

Ian CATHRO

(Estoril)

'A thoroughly modern coach'

Everybody loves a feel-good story, and one certainly has emerged at the Estoril Praia club on the west coast of Portugal. Over the past couple of years, Scottish head coach Ian Cathro has transformed a previously unfashionable and ill-resourced outfit into one of the most competitive sides in the Portuguese top flight.

After steering the Canaries to an excellent eighth-place finish last season, the 38-year-old has been defying the pundits again this term, his happy band of interlopers further embedding themselves in the upper third of the table.

Cathro's pivotal role in the Estoril fairy tale is not merely a question of points accumulated. What really sets his team apart is the boldness with which they go about their attacking business: flexible, fluid and always looking to play on the front foot. At times, Estoril give off the vibes of an adventurous old-school Brazil team.

"A breath of fresh air"...Cathro has impressed in Portugal

First solo role...Cathro took charge of Hearts in December 2016

Starting out...Cathro serving as Nuno Espirito Santo's assistant at Valencia during the 2014-15 season

Few sides in the Portuguese Primeira Liga have looked as good going forward as Estoril these past few months. The goals have flowed at a remarkable lick and it says everything about Cathro's exciting philosophy that they have remained right among the league's top scorers in 2025-26, even keeping pace with heavyweights like Porto and Benfica.

Often described in the Portuguese press as a "breath of fresh air", the Scot is a thoroughly modern coach, thoughtful, progressive, a good communicator – pitch perfect in his grasp of the Portuguese language – and knows just how to put his ideas across. In press conferences he regularly displays a winning sense of humour and is as honest as he is realistic, keen to stress that the club are only in the early stages of building durable success. "Playing a few games in Europe and then not pushing on is not very interesting," he recently declared when asked about the prospects of Estoril making the European competition cut this season.

Bitten by the coaching bug while still a teenager, Cathro was a long-serving member of Nuno Espirito Santo's backroom staff, earning his corn at Portuguese side Rio Ave, Valencia, Wolverhampton Wanderers, Tottenham Hotspur and Al Ittihad in Saudi Arabia. He also enjoyed an 18-month spell as a first-team coach at Newcastle United.

Prior to his appointment at Estoril, his only taste of solo management came in an unhappy, short-lived stint in charge of Edinburgh club Hearts. Appointed in December 2016, Scottish sceptics wrote him off as a "laptop manager", decrying his lack of playing experience. Those critics were vindicated when he was sacked nine months later with a win rate of just 26%, but he has dusted himself down, learned his lessons and bounced back.

Nick Bidwell

COACHES

Claudio **GIRALDEZ**
(Celta Vigo)
A journeyman full-back in his playing days, almost exclusively operating in the Spanish third division, the 37-year-old Galician earned a hatful of brownie points when leading Celta to European qualification last season, their first continental ticket in eight years.

Cesc **FABREGAS**
(Como)
As a player, Fabregas displayed tremendous on-field intelligence and played under the likes of Arsene Wenger, Antonio Conte, Jose Mourinho and Pep Guardiola, so it is no surprise to see the 38-year-old thriving as head coach of Serie A side Como (more on page 56).

Merlin **POLZIN**
(Hamburg)
Promoted from within to the HSV first-team hot seat in December 2024, the 35-year-old local man – and long-time rabid fan of the club – immediately pulled off a miraculous turnaround, taking the team back to the Bundesliga after a seven-year wait. Has given HSV much-needed identity and energy.

Didier **DIGARD**
(Le Havre)
For reasons unknown, French sportswriters make a habit of undervaluing the abilities of the intense and opinionated Le Havre coach. The 39-year-old has tactically outsmarted a string of more experienced Ligue 1 bosses and did amazingly well to stave off relegation last season.

Filipe LUIS

(Unattached)

'A player who was destined to be a coach'

In Argentina, it is entirely normal for players with top-class experience to move into coaching, but there has been almost nothing similar in Brazil. High-profile names have not been tempted to become coaches, which is clearly a problem. Important knowledge has been missed out on and space has opened up for foreigners to take key jobs with Brazilian clubs and now even the national team.

This is why the emergence of Filipe Luis in his 17-month spell with Flamengo is so significant. As a left-back, he won more than 40 Brazil caps in a ten-year international career, and spent over a decade in Europe, principally with Atletico Madrid but also with Real Madrid B, Deportivo La Coruna and Chelsea. This was rounded off with a triumphant three-and-a-half-year spell with Flamengo, important because it allowed the Brazilian public to finally become aware of his quality and intelligence. Rival coaches sometimes pointed out that Filipe Luis had read their minds and was organising his team-mates on the field. He was a player who was destined to be a coach, and when he retired at the end of 2023 he stopped being Flamengo's left-back and immediately became the club's Under-17 coach.

He had an interesting 2024. By the middle of the year, he was in charge of the Under-20s, leading his side to victory over then-European youth champions Olympiacos. By October, when Flamengo were knocked out of the Copa Libertadores and the manager, former Brazil boss Tite, was sacked, Filipe Luis was coaching the first team.

South American champion...Filipe Luis holds the Copa Libertadores trophy

He began on a caretaker basis, with the lowest salary in Brazil's first division. By the end of the following year, he had won the Brazilian Cup, the league and the Libertadores. Serious, unflashy and clearly gifted, he carried a quiet strength and intelligence.

The major disappointments came outside the continent. Flamengo were knocked out of the Club World Cup by Bayern Munich and although they held PSG for the full 120 minutes of the FIFA Intercontinental Cup final, they lost on penalties. Both times, he blew his

Jorge **BAVA**
(Cerro Porteno)
Played in goal for Liverpool Montevideo until he was almost 40, then immediately became their coach and led the team to their first-ever league title in 2023. Has since won a Colombian title with Santa Fe, and is now in charge of one of Paraguay's traditional big two.

Rafael **GUANAES**
(Mirassol)
A coach since the age of 29 who rocketed to prominence during an extraordinary 2025. Mirassol were given no chance in Brazil's first division, but instead finished fourth with an attractive style of football that made the game look easy – the classic sign of a well-coached side.

Diego **MARTINEZ**
(Universidad Catolica)
A youth coach with LDU Quito, Independiente del Valle and Real Salt Lake who enjoyed a fine 2025 in his first season as a senior coach, carrying Universidad Catolica to triumph in the Ecuadorian Cup. Still only 38, he is a promising young coach with a big future.

Eduardo **DOMINGUEZ**
(Atletico Mineiro)
More than ten years on from his first head coach role with Huracan, Dominguez is not a fresh face. Yet the 47-year-old has plenty of upwards momentum after a flurry of silverware in three years at Estudiantes. Now has the biggest opportunity of his career after taking charge of Atletico Mineiro.

"Serious, unflashy and clearly gifted" ...Filipe Luis

cheeks and admitted the opponent had been better. Now he has his sights set on leading teams of that calibre.

Filipe Luis is clearly thinking big and global, and this was probably one of the factors for his bizarre sacking in early March, after his team had just won 8-0. True, other early season results had been disappointing, but relations with the club had become strained during December's contract negotiations and, just two months after handing him a much improved deal, the directors seemed in a rush to get rid of him.

And so after winning plenty of titles and being sacked, Filipe Luis can consider his apprenticeship complete.

Tim Vickery

Pellegrino **MATARAZZO**

(Real Sociedad)

'A future manager of the USA'

"Uniquely experienced American head coach" ...Pellegrino Matarazzo

Since emerging as head coach of German side Stuttgart, Matarazzo has sparked increased intrigue back home in the United States.

As he led Stuttgart from the German second tier to the top half of the Bundesliga, news gradually filtered through to the US that they might have a top coach among their ranks.

Matarazzo's only experience of American soccer had come as a student at Columbia University. Having grown up in New Jersey as a son of Italian immigrants, Matarazzo was drawn to Europe and fancied his chances of becoming a professional player there. He eventually found playing time in the German lower leagues, but this was as much a coaching apprenticeship as it was a playing career, especially as it came at a time when German football was playing a key part in the evolution of the game and producing many top coaches.

He went on to become a player-coach at Nuremberg, and from there moved to youth coaching and assistant roles with Hoffenheim before the head coach job at Stuttgart.

It began a coaching journey that will surely take him back across the Atlantic eventually; Matarazzo is almost certainly a future manager of the USA. He was a candidate for the job in 2024, but his current path, sticking with club football and experiencing different leagues, may well be the better one for now.

In the second chapter of his career, Matarazzo is now coaching outside of Germany for the first time. When he joined Real Sociedad at the start of 2026, the 48-year-old became the first American to manage in La Liga. He took a struggling *La Real*, sitting 16th in the league, on a nine-game unbeaten run in all competitions. It was a run that saw them reach the final of the Copa del Rey and go from being worried about relegation to eyeing European qualification.

His style, as you might expect from someone schooled in German football in the early 21st century, features intense high-pressing and counter-attacking. Yet he's also shown flexibility, adapting to a possession game at times and starting life at Sociedad with a back four instead of the 3-5-2 or 3-4-3 he preferred in Germany.

In his time out of work, Matarazzo sought advice from some experienced managers, including Claudio Ranieri and Gian Piero Gasperini. It's these experiences, from Italian heritage and Columbia University to the Basque Country via Germany, that make him a uniquely experienced American coach.

James Nalton

Abel **FERREIRA**
(Palmeiras)
"He always has a plan," has been a refrain of Palmeiras players during Ferreira's six and a half years in charge. With his time in Brazil presumably coming to an end, where next? There will be plenty of takers for a coach with the drive, cunning and charisma of a young Jose Mourinho.

Rafael **MARQUEZ**
(Mexico, assistant)
Despite his coaching experience being limited to a spell in charge of Barcelona B and serving as Mexico assistant, former *El Tri* captain Marquez is lined up to take over from Javier Aguirre after the World Cup. Also tipped to be a future Barca boss.

Michael **BRADLEY**
(New York Red Bulls)
Following in the coaching footsteps of father Bob, Bradley's first head coaching role is with a Red Bull setup known for developing managers as well as players. Spent last year coaching the New York outfit's reserve side, winning the MLS Next Pro title.

Matt **WELLS**
(Colorado Rapids)
A former assistant of Scott Parker, first in Tottenham Hotspur's academy and then at Fulham, Bournemouth and Club Brugge, before returning to Spurs in 2023. Succeeding in Colorado, one of the tougher MLS gigs, would be a further boost to Wells' growing reputation.

Gavin LEE

(Singapore)

'One of Southeast Asia's most promising young coaches'

Qualification secured ...Singapore players celebrate making history after beating Hong Kong

After mixed results under three successive Japanese coaches, in November the Singapore FA appointed only their third permanent local national team coach in over 30 years. Despite his tender age of 35, Gavin Lee has already had success on the sidelines and many believe has the potential to deliver much more.

Lee started on his coaching journey in 2014 as an analyst and worked his way up. By 2019, he was in charge of Singapore Premier League club Tampines Rovers, at the age of 29, and stayed there until 2025, winning the Singapore Cup along the way.

By then, he had established a reputation as one of Southeast Asia's most promising young coaches. In 2024, he became a part-time assistant of the national team under Tsutomu Ogura. When the Japanese boss suddenly left last summer for personal reasons, Lee took the job on an interim basis and achieved almost instant and historic success.

The first three competitive games came in qualification for the 2027 Asian Cup. Singapore had never made it to the continental stage by merit before, with their sole appearance coming as hosts in 1984.

There was disappointment when India equalised in the last minute for a 1-1 draw in October but, five days later, the Lions went to the subcontinent and won 2-1. That set up the all-important November clash against a rival for the sole qualification spot in the group, Hong Kong. In this battle of Asian financial centres, Hong Kong took an early lead but Singapore held their nerve with two second-half goals and the rest really was history.

"We had a plan," Lee said. "Before the game, we'd been speaking that football is not perfect, just like life. And when s*** hits the fan, it's our job to react and deal with it. As long as we stayed in the game, we always knew we have quality players to help us finish the game."

Lee is part of a new breed of coaches, happy to take what he has learned from overseas tacticians and adding his own little spark, helped by an impressive attention to detail. When taking over from Ogura, he didn't make wholesale changes, keeping the same intensity and a possession-based game, though he seemed a little more adaptable than his predecessor.

Local appointment... Lee took permanent charge of Singapore in November 2025

The real testament to his talents is that he got the job on a permanent basis despite the talk of famous foreign names such as Harry Kewell and Fabio Cannavaro coming in for the Asian Cup and then the start of qualification for the 2030 World Cup. In the end, there wasn't much debate.

"Lee demonstrated a deep understanding of the team's tactical identity in his time in charge of the Lions, establishing a rapport with players," the FA said. "While overseas candidates had been shortlisted and interviewed, it quickly became clear that it was important to have a leader who could best help the Lions build on their momentum." The FA know a good thing when they see it.

John Duerden

Mark **MILLIGAN**
(Newcastle Jets)
Formerly a well-travelled and tough-tackling midfielder, Milligan gained experience as an assistant before taking his first senior role at Newcastle Jets in 2025. It's early days for the 40-year-old, but the signs are good, winning the Australia Cup last season and leading the A-League this.

Shao **JIAYI**
(China)
Spent years playing in Germany, an experience that, combined with his local knowledge, helped him get the China national team job in November. The 45-year-old's experience is limited to coaching roles with the national team and a year in charge of Qingdao West Coast.

Anoush **DASTGIR**
(Netherlands Under-18s)
The Afghan coach is only 36 years old but can already look back on a 14-year coaching career, including leading his home nation at the age of 29. Now working with the Dutch Under-18s after three years coaching at Almere City.

Rulani MOKWENA

(Mouloudia Alger)

'Breaking new ground for black African coaches'

"Glowing reputation" ...Rulani Mokwena

The 39-year-old South African has already won four league titles in his home country and is now looking to do the same in Algeria, breaking new ground for black African coaches.

Mokwena has taken Mouloudia Alger to the top of the table in the North African country's Ligue 1, losing just one league game by the halfway point of the season and establishing a handy lead at the top of the standings.

Coaches from south of the Sahara have never previously been employed in Algeria, but Mokwena's hiring reflects the glowing reputation that a new crop of coaches from South Africa, all heavily influenced by Pep Guardiola, have earned around the continent.

Mokwena is the nephew of Jomo Sono, one of South Africa's all-time greats, but unlike his uncle, or his father Julias Sono Hloae, Mokwena had no playing career. His coaching career began while he was still a teenager, moving rapidly up through the ranks as his reputation for obsessive study of the game and meticulous planning grew. He was an assistant to Pitso Mosimane at Mamelodi Sundowns before moving to a similar post at Orlando Pirates, where he got his first head coach experience, stepping in as caretaker for 15 games in 2019 when he was only 32.

He went back during the COVID pandemic to help at Sundowns and, when Mosimane moved to African giants Al Ahly of Egypt, Mokwena and fellow assistant Manqoba Mngqithi were surprise appointees to take over at the South African champions from the start of the 2020-21 season. By then, Sundowns had already won three successive championships but Mngqithi and the much younger Mokwena kept up the dominance and added the next two. There were suggestions that they had only picked up the mantle and, with a far superior squad to any other club in the Premier Soccer League, it was predictable that Sundowns' success would continue. But in truth, they made many key improvements in playing style, approach and personnel that helped strengthen Sundowns' domestic supremacy.

Early in the 2022-23 season, Mokwena was appointed solo coach with Mngqithi demoted after a shock domestic cup loss. The impact was immediate, with a record-breaking run of 16 successive wins, a 5-2 thrashing of Al Ahly in the Champions League group phase and winning the South African league by a runaway 16 points.

Mokwena won the league again in 2023-24 when Sundowns were 30 minutes away from becoming the first side in South African history to end the league season unbeaten and finished a record 23 points clear at the top. But he was then summarily fired, paying the price for failing to get the club into the Champions League final. Sundowns had made a habit of romping through the group phase (under Mokwena setting a record of 16 out of a possible 18 points), before then crashing out in either the quarter-finals or semi-finals. Since then, Mokwena spent last season at Wydad Casablanca in Morocco and is now chasing success in Algeria.

Mark Gleeson

Mohamed **OUAHBI**
(Morocco)
Belgian-Moroccan coach who started as a youth coach at Anderlecht. Last year he led Morocco to the Under-20 World Cup in Chile and was nominated for Coach of the Year at the 2025 CAF awards. He was promoted to the senior role after the departure of Walid Regragui.

Fousseni **DIAWARA**
(Mali Under-23s)
The former Mali right-back, who won 53 caps, is now in his second spell as his country's Under-23s coach. He's produced a steady stream of talented players for the senior side, including the highly-rated Lens midfielder Mamadou Sangare and Red Bull Salzburg's Gaoussou Diakite.

Mehdi **EL JABRI**
(US Yacoub El Mansour)
At just 28 years old, El Jabri this season became the youngest head coach in Moroccan top-flight history after leading US Yacoub El Mansour, a small club from the capital city of Rabat, from the third tier to the first with successive promotions.

DOUBLE ACT

Meet the managerial duo leading Viking back to the top of Norwegian football

Words: Josh Butler

Good things come to those who wait, or so the old adage goes. And Viking FK have done more than their fair share of waiting – 34 years' worth to be precise.

Based in the southern Norwegian coastal city of Stavanger, commonly known as the Oil Capital of Norway, Viking are traditionally one of the country's largest clubs. With nine *seriesgull* (literally "series gold" or championship-winning medals), in addition to two silver and ten bronze medals, only 26-time champions Rosenborg BK have more title wins.

Yet despite their standing in Norway, a cult of mockery has developed around Viking over the last three decades, owing to their habit of regularly finishing inside the top three without actually winning the league. They are the perennial also-rans if you're being kind, or the annual bottlers if you're feeling cruel (or are a die-hard supporter of rivals SK Brann).

Understandably, it's a record the club hierarchy were very keen to dispense of. They finally did just that in 2025 by somewhat unorthodox means, under the guidance of joint head coaches: Bjarte Lunde Aarsheim and Morten Jensen.

"If you're going to compare it to another trade, it would be like founders of a company owning it equally," Jensen tells *World Soccer*, "or maybe a very happily married couple running the family together."

This is not the case of a cool new stepfather sweeping into the household; both men have been embedded in the Viking family for a long time. Aarsheim made 278 appearances for the club between 1994 and 2005, experiencing four bronze medals in the process, while Jensen spent 18 months with the club in his youth. As a pair, they served as assistant managers to Bjarne Berntsen between 2017 and 2020 before both individually applied for the position of head coach.

"We actually found out during the interview process that we could do it together," Jensen admits. "The club were aware that there had been some people who were successful with a dual model before, and they thought that we had the right mindset, were able to put our own egos to the side and were willing to put the club first."

Having ridden out the turbulent years, which included relegation in 2017 to the second tier for the first time since 1986 and a near-bankruptcy, without wavering in their professionalism or dedication to the club, Aarsheim and Jensen's reputation in Stavanger was excellent.

"We thought that we worked very well together and the club agreed," adds Aarsheim. "They thought that if we ran the team together, we would be successful, regardless of who was the head coach and who was the assistant."

Instead, the club chose not to make that distinction and so, in November 2020, they announced the appointment of both Aarsheim and Jensen as joint head coaches. While not exactly a common practice, it is not unheard of either; as well as Viking, Club Atletico Platense also enjoyed success with this approach in 2025, winning Argentina's Torneo Apertura with Favio Orsi and Sergio Gomez at the helm.

"We actually have people coming from all over the world to learn from our model," professes Aarsheim with a well-earned sense of pride.

Given that the executive power on the sporting side of a football club tends to lie with a single figure – be that the traditional managerial archetype of, say, Sir Alex Ferguson or increasingly through a director of football – the appointment of two managers begs the inevitable question of what happens when conflict arises. For Aarsheim and Jensen, the

Double act...Viking head coaches Morten Jensen and Bjarte Lunde Aarsheim with their 2025 honours
Credit: Viking FK

key to managing this relationship is a strong foundation of mutual respect.

"We never have disagreements over how we're going to run the first team, but sometimes there will be discussions over team selection, like who's going to start, and we always say that we will discuss the matter until we have an agreement," explains Jensen. "Then, when we agree, we never have any regrets. There is no coming back and saying: 'Oh, I told you so, I said so'. We are 100% on board once the decision is made."

In a profession where ego all too readily enters the conversation, it is a refreshing insight into the kind of democratic power-sharing that is so alien at the top level of English football. Given that the strains of management are often made evident by those who undertake the role, it seems strange that, as football has evolved in every other aspect, steps aren't taken more widely on the managerial side to share the burdens involved with the position like they are at Viking.

Coaches of the Year...Aarsheim and Jensen conduct an interview holding the Eliteserien Coach of the Year trophy *Credit: Viking FK*

"We are modern, we are always looking for ways to improve. For example, neither of us have any strong desire to be in front of the media, so we can alternate that job," says Jensen – even though he has done more of the talking in this particular interview. "It really works well. In fact, many times it's been said that the loneliest job in the world is to be a football manager, but since we are sharing it, it feels like we are re-boosting our energy. By sharing and alternating responsibilities, we have a clear strategy on how to handle situations and solve problems."

Just like parents, Aarsheim and Jensen share pastoral duties when it comes to their squad, too. If a player has an issue or a complaint, he has two opportunities to resolve the situation, but do either manager feel any jealousy if a player elects to

Norwegian champions... Viking's players during last season's title-winning campaign

confide in one and not the other?

"Sometimes they come to both of us and ask for a meeting and sometimes if one player has a little bit of a stronger relationship with the other, it doesn't really matter for us. We have no egos here," says Jensen. "The most important is that we see the individual. When it comes to man management, that's probably our strongest asset. We are very close to the players, and if you think of a squad of 25 players who need and want to be seen and spoken to daily, then we are able to cover this much better when there is two of us and not one."

It is a philosophy that has clearly worked given that Viking secured their first championship since 1991, and the circumstances of their success could not have been more difficult. Aarsheim and Jensen are up against Kjetil Knutsen's mighty Bodo/Glimt side, who had won four of the previous five titles, and who pushed Viking to the final day of the campaign. Such is the enormity of the threat Glimt pose that Viking only dropped 19 points all season and still finished just a single point ahead of the Northern Norwegians.

"Consistency is important," says Aarsheim, as Jensen nods in agreement. "We have people who are hungry and willing to move barriers, but it's also important to build a strong economy, so you're able to attract players from higher levels."

There is an acceptance of reality from both men. They accept that footballing success is typically built upon strong economic foundations, and are also more than willing to give credit to rival teams.

"We have been inspired and motivated by what Bodo have achieved, which is a smaller town than Stavanger with less resources at that time, but now they are doing tremendously well in the Champions League. They have developed a solid economy, and they play attractive football," says Jensen. "I think there's a lot of similarities of what they've done to what we are doing now and luckily enough, we were able to beat them last year."

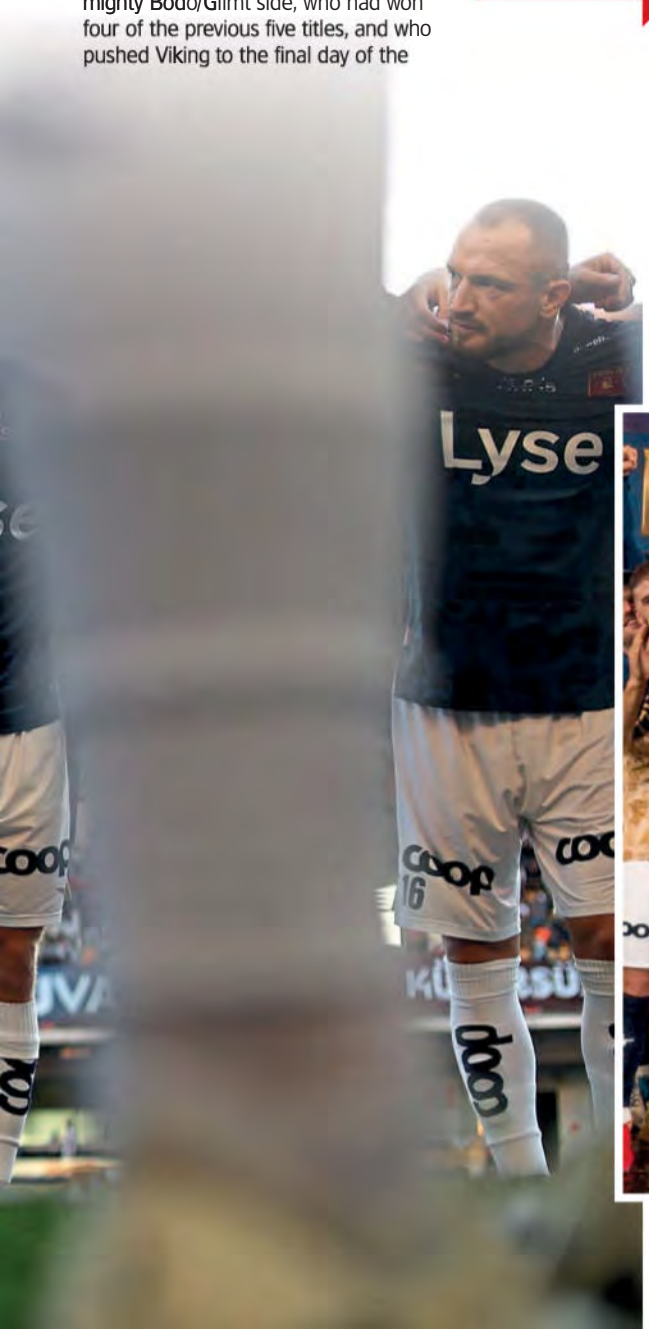
> "It's been said that the loneliest job in the world is to be a football manager. But since we are sharing it, it feels like we are re-boosting our energy"
>
> **Viking joint head coach Morten Jensen**

As 2022 champions Molde have proved, beating Bodo/Glimt to the title in modern Norway simply isn't sufficient to topple them. Disrupt them, perhaps, but Aarsheim and Jensen are under no illusions that to repeat the feat will take a mammoth effort, and that the real goal is to be competitive in Europe – just as Knutsen has managed.

For now, with the 2026 season dawning and with a strong pre-season under their belts, Viking are focusing on making a good start to the new campaign. In 2025, they lost just one of their first 15 games yet still had to wait for the final day of the season for confirmation their 34-year wait was over. Bodo set a relentless pace, which they will need to match.

No matter what happens with the remainder of Bjarte Lunde Aarsheim and Morten Jensen's careers – whether as a pair or if they decide to go solo – they will always be celebrated as the two men that finally brought success back to Stavanger.

So with Viking, maybe it was less of a case of good things come to those who wait, and more like you wait ages for a head coach to come along and win you the league, and two turn up at once.



Title celebration...Aarsheim and Jensen celebrate winning the Norwegian league title *Credit: Viking FK*

Shining star... Diomande has been one of RB Leipzig's standout perfomers so far this season

SHINE LIKE A DIOMANDE

Yan Diomande only graduated from school two years ago – now he's one of the most wanted young footballers in the world

Words: Bence Bocsak

Working as a director of soccer at the DME Academy, an elite private sports school in Florida, Todd Eason has seen plenty of talented kids from all over the globe. But none of them were quite like Yan Diomande.

"Yan came to us from one of our partners in Africa," Eason, the school's former director of soccer, tells *World Soccer*. "I knew right away there was something different about him."

Eason had seen clips of Diomande as a 15-year-old scoring goals for fun at the West African Football Union Under-17 tournament, prompting him to bring the player over from the Ivory Coast. Four years on, he is an Ivory Coast international, a regular in the Bundesliga and a transfer target for a host of elite European clubs.

Last summer, RB Leipzig paid Spanish side Leganes €20 million for Diomande. If reports are to be believed, the 19-year-old will be on the move again in 2026 for a much bigger fee. His valuation has shot up due not only to an impressive debut campaign in the German top flight but also by helping his national team reach the AFCON quarter-finals earlier this year in Morocco. The upcoming World Cup will provide a platform for Diomande to enhance his reputation further.

It has been a rapid ascent, one that began with the decision to leave his home in Abidjan for Florida. Leaving his family behind was tough on the teenager, but his advisors thought that the experience would better prepare him for the challenge of stepping into professional football.

DME has hundreds of pupils from across the globe, but was chosen by Diomande and is family due to the school's record with athletes from Africa. The football team, run by Eason, included players from the Ivory Coast, Senegal and South Sudan, which meant Diomande would share a dressing room with players from similar cultures and backgrounds.

In this environment, Diomande very quickly shone. For Eason, the thing that set the new recruit apart from his peers was his intelligence.

"He could see things and he knew what was being asked of him without having things explained to him," Eason says. "When I worked with him, he would basically be the translator for me with the other French-speaking kids because he could pick up and understand what I was doing. He was very helpful. When I saw that, I knew there was something special about him. He's just got an unbelievable IQ for the game of football."

Eason's job was to guide Diomande throughout the two years he spent at DME. But at first, he was simply blown away by his talent.

"The one thing that Yan is so gifted with is running at speed with the ball and being under control. He wasn't always focused on one-v-ones, but the things that he could do running

at pace with the ball under control was something that I hadn't seen.

"I've coached a lot of African kids, and Spanish and South American kids. I just thought Yan was different in how he could manipulate the ball at pace. That was one thing that I knew was going to get him to the next level. His decision-making and ability on the ball were second to none."

Despite Diomande's ability to beat everyone on the field, he would often be searching for his team-mates rather than looking to do it all himself.

"He was such a dominant player, but he was always looking to lay balls off to our number nine or whatnot; he wasn't selfish at all," Eason says. "There were a lot of times when I knew he could do it. There were times that he could just take over a game if he wanted to and score, but he never did. He was a very unselfish player.

"We actually tried to get him to recognise the times to be selfish and then recognise the times that being able to lay balls off was a better option.

"He had such an intelligence and humility for the game. Dio wasn't coming here and saying, 'I'm using my athleticism, I'm using my strength to win games.' He was really just kind of preparing himself to be a complete player every day, always wanting to learn and always seeking to be a better player rather than just getting by on his one great skill or his own innate ability."

It wasn't all easy going for Diomande in the beginning. A new environment comes with new challenges. Being so much better than everyone else will naturally attract adversaries on the pitch. Players tried to target him and get in his head. Diomande struggled overcoming these nerves and challenges at the start.

Eason stepped in to help him become more mindful on the pitch and to be able to shut out the outside noise.

"We focused a lot on controlling his emotions. He was exposed to situations on the field and off the field that challenged him in terms of how he would decide to handle it," Eason explains. "On the pitch, there were times where the opposition got to him. I think he got a red card in his second game. So, we had to help him understand that those kinds of things are going to happen. You're going to have players picking and trying to draw you to get cards.

"And then there were things off the field socially, you know, making sure he's making good decisions."

Diomande learned quickly. Within

Starting out... Diomande in action for DME Academy *Credit: Jon Shank*

just a few months, he was starting to attract the attention of scouts from across the globe. He first went on trial to MLS clubs, and then went to the UK for spells at Rangers, Chelsea and Bournemouth.

All passed on offering him a contract, but Diomande used the experiences to learn and become better.

"My assistant coach did a lot of individual training and small group training with him," Eason says. "One thing they tried to focus on was working on his left foot a little bit more because as a winger, he always wanted to play left-wing so he can cut in and go on his right. And I think through some of these trials he went on, they put him on the right side and asked him to do more things on his left foot. At that point, Dio recognised that he needed to get stronger with his left foot."

A few years later, the fruit of that work is clear. That weakness has become Diomande's strength; out of his first ten senior goals at club level, five were scored with his left foot.

It is this constant development that convinces Eason that Diomande is set for the top.

"When Dio got here, I was like, 'holy cow this kid is much better than anyone I have seen.' I thought it would be easy for him to get to MLS," Eason says. "But then as he went on all these other trials, I started realising there's something bigger here. I kept trying to schedule games that would challenge him and there wasn't one game I could create that would give him a challenge. We even went down and played Colorado Rapids in pre-season, and we ended up beating them 4-3, and it was all because of Dio."

> "When Dio got here, I was like, 'holy cow this kid is much better than anyone I have seen'"
>
> Diomande's former coach, Todd Eason

On his 18th birthday, in November 2024, Diomande agreed to join Leganes, then in La Liga. The plan was for him to play for the club's reserve team, but within a few months, he came on to make his debut for the senior side against Real Madrid in March 2025.

He went on to play all of Leganes' last ten games of the La Liga season. By the end of the campaign, he wasn't just playing but standing out with his performances in a struggling side, one that would go on to be relegated.

"As soon as he started playing a few games there [at Leganes], I was like, 'he's not going to stop,'" says Eason. "In a short time, he became the most dominant player on the pitch and that's when I realised, he needs to go to an even higher level."

A number of clubs wanted Diomande last summer, but Leipzig ultimately won the race for his services. And just as he had done at DME and Leganes, he settled in instantly and already seems ready for the next challenge. In October, he got his first taste of international football and scored in each of his first two appearances. In December, back at Leipzig, he became the second-youngest hat-trick scorer in Bundesliga history.

"This kid just continues to raise the level to be the best player on any field," Eason says.

Where next? Depending on what you read, it could be Liverpool, Paris Saint-Germain, Barcelona or any number of Champions League sides. As far as Eason is concerned, wherever it is, Diomande will be ready.

"I have no idea how much further he can go. There's no level that can contain him. He is that special."

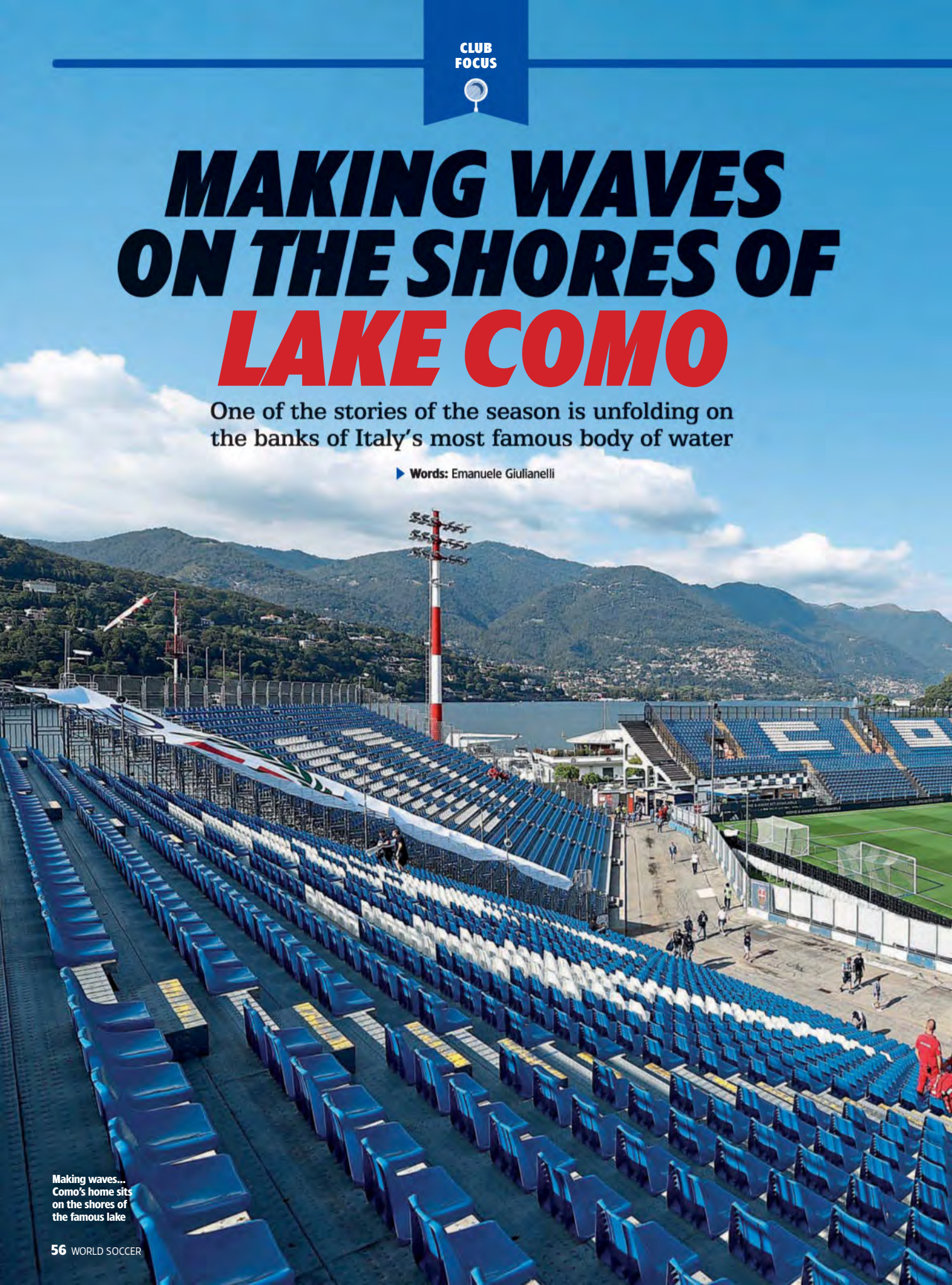
La Liga debut... Diomande takes on Real Madrid's Vinicius Junior in his first-ever league game

AFCON starlet... Diomande in action at the 2025 Africa Cup of Nations in Morocco

MAKING WAVES ON THE SHORES OF LAKE COMO

One of the stories of the season is unfolding on the banks of Italy's most famous body of water

Words: Emanuele Giulianelli



Making waves... Como's home sits on the shores of the famous lake

For many years, Como has been known more as a tourist destination than the home of a serious sporting outfit. The town's most famous residents were Hollywood actors – George Clooney owns a villa overlooking the famous lake – rather than footballers. Yet thanks to the rise of Como 1907, that is all starting to change.

A small club with a history of bankruptcy and lower-league obscurity, Como have found themselves competing with the very biggest clubs in Serie A, pushing hard for European qualification, and under the guidance of a World Cup-winning midfielder. The days of being better known for their stadium's stunning scenic backdrop are long gone.

Founded in 1907 at the Taroni bar on Via Cinque Giornate, the club spent decades bouncing between divisions, occasionally gracing Serie A but never quite establishing themselves among Italy's elite. This century alone they have moved between divisions 12 times, five relegations and seven promotions, from the fourth to the first tiers of Italian football.

Their highest Serie A placing came way back in 1949-50 when they finished seventh, but their most successful and prolonged top-flight spell came between 1984 and 1989, when the goals of Dan Corneliusson and Stefano Borgonovo, and the defensive protection offered by the fearsome Pasquale Bruno, saw the club play five consecutive top-flight seasons, propelling them to a ninth-place finish in 1985-86. But the 21st century was cruel. Two bankruptcies – in 2004 and 2017 – saw Como plunged into the non-professional depths of Serie D, their once-proud identity reduced to little more than a lakeside memory.

The turning point arrived in 2019, when Indonesian tobacco conglomerate Djarum Group, led by billionaire brothers Robert Budi and Michael Bambang Hartono, purchased the club. *Forbes* ranked them the 64th and 66th richest men on the planet: suddenly, Como had the wealthiest owners in Italian football.

But money alone was never going to be enough. What Como needed was vision and, in August 2022, that arrived in the form of 35-year-old Cesc Fabregas.

Mastermind...Como head coach Cesc Fabregas has been integral to the club's rise

The former Arsenal, Barcelona, Chelsea and Spain midfielder, at the tail end of his 20-year playing career, initially joined as both minority shareholder and player, with his former Gunners team-mate Thierry Henry also taking a stake.

Fabregas played 17 league matches in the 2022-23 season, which ended with a mid-table finish, before hanging up his boots. The following November, after manager Moreno Longo had been dismissed, he stepped into the dugout with the team sat at the top of Serie B.

Italian football requires that head coaches in the top two divisions have the UEFA Pro Licence, a qualification that Fabregas did not have. As a result, his assistant, Welshman Osian Roberts, was made nominal head coach with Fabregas relegated to the role of assistant, but it was a switch in name only; the Spaniard remained the brains behind the operation.

Promotion was secured on the final day of the 2023-24 season, a 1-1 draw at Cosenza sealing second place, and a few weeks later Fabregas was officially confirmed as Como's head coach.

Ahead of their first top-flight season in 21 years, many tipped Como for an immediate return to Serie B – but Fabregas had other ideas. Armed with shrewd signings such as Nico Paz from Real Madrid, Ignace Van Der Brempt from Red Bull Salzburg and Maximo Perrone from Manchester City, Como played some of the most attractive football in the top tier and finished a stunning tenth with 49 points. The football world took notice.

Second season syndrome in 2025-26? Far from it. Aided by their wealthy owners, Como demonstrated their ambition in last summer's transfer window. The total investment exceeded anything ever seen in Como's history, splashing more than €100 million on the likes of Martin Baturina from Dinamo Zagreb, Maxence Caqueret (Lyon), Jesus Rodriguez (Real Betis) and, in a move that raised eyebrows across the Italian peninsula, Alvaro Morata on loan from Milan. They were one of the biggest-spending European clubs outside of the Premier League, while no club in Italy had a greater net spend.

The results have matched the ambition. In February, a 1-1 draw with Milan (a match that almost took place in Australia) and a stunning 2-0 away win against Juventus put them in sixth place with 45 points from 26 matches, not far off last year's tally. Just as impressive was their goal difference of +22, the second best in Serie A, demonstrating their attacking verve and defensive solidity. That was boosted by January's 6-0 demolition of Torino, their biggest-ever Serie A victory.

In February, they beat Napoli on penalties to reach the Coppa Italia semi-finals for only the second time in their history, matching the achievement of 1985-86 when they were beaten by Sampdoria. This time they have been drawn against Internazionale, with the second leg to take place on April 22.

The style of play is unmistakably Fabregas. A disciple of Pep Guardiola's positional play at Barcelona and Arsene Wenger's fluid attacking philosophy at Arsenal, the Spaniard demands a possession-based, technically exquisite game built from the back.

Como has been known more as a tourist destination than the home of a serious sporting outfit…yet thanks to the rise of Como 1907, that is all starting to change

At the heart of everything is Paz. The 21-year-old Argentina playmaker, signed from Real Madrid for just €6m with a buy-back clause, has blossomed into one of Serie A's most devastating talents. Named the league's Best Young Player for 2024-25, he has continued to improve in the current campaign; nobody has scored or created more Serie A goals for Como.

The supporting cast has also delivered. Greece striker Anastasios Douvikas, a summer arrival from Celta Vigo, has emerged as the team's top scorer across all competitions, Croatian

Flying high... Como are chasing Champions League football

Star player...Nico Paz celebrates another Serie A goal

schemer Baturina has contributed in his debut season, while Lucas Da Cunha, a bargain €400,000 signing from Nice in 2023, has proven invaluable in midfield.

Yet for all their impressive individuals, Como are an excellent collective, and the numbers back that up.

A team's pressing ability is notoriously difficult to measure, but passes per defensive action (PPDA) is a reasonable way of quantifying it. And by those metrics, Fabregas' team press with greater intensity than any other side in Europe's top five leagues. Their PPDA of 7.8 means that their opponents average fewer than eight passes in their own third before a tackle or interception from a Como player, and that is the lowest of any team in the Italian, English, Spanish, German or French top flights.

With the ball, they have the highest average possession, have played more line-breaking passes, and attempt the fewest long balls in Serie A. It is possession with a purpose: deliberate, progressive and designed to suffocate.

Defensively, the numbers are pretty solid too. By early March, Como had conceded the joint-second fewest goals in the league, and their goalkeeper Jean Butez had recorded 15 clean sheets in all competitions. The French keeper,

signed from Antwerp for just €2.1m, has been one of the bargains of the season.

Off the pitch, the transformation is equally dramatic. In July 2025, Como announced a partnership with Italian luxury brand Brioni for their formalwear. In early 2026, they entered the world of esports through a Kings League Italy tie-up. Como might have rich owners, but in an era of FFP and spending limits, that is only half the battle. The club's commercial and cultural footprint is expanding as rapidly as its league position. Como has become the talk of Hollywood, with the Stadio Sinigaglia drawing A-list celebrities like Hugh Grant, Keira Knightley, Michael Fassbender, Adrien Brody, Andrew Garfield, Kate Beckinsale and Benedict Cumberbatch to its lakeside stands. The club's savvy marketing strategy capitalises on the area's glamour, turning matches into must-see events for stars and football royalty alike.

For Fabregas, this is only the beginning. At 38, he is the third-youngest coach in Serie A and arguably the most exciting tactical mind to emerge in Italian football since Maurizio Sarri reinvented Napoli. The question is no longer whether Como belong in Serie A, but how high they can climb. Como are no longer a feel-good story or a romantic novelty. They are a serious footballing project, built around an identity, a visionary coach and an ownership willing to invest at the highest level. On the shores of Lake Como, they are not simply keeping their heads above water – they are making waves that reverberate across all of Italian football. Soon, they hope that the Champions League anthem will be heard on the shores of the lake.

Another win ...Como players celebrate with their fans at the Stadio Giuseppe Sinigaglia

THE STADIUM

Stadio Giuseppe Sinigaglia

Como play their football at one of the most breathtaking and picturesque settings in world football. Nestled on the south western shore of Lake Como, just steps from the water's edge, the ground offers views of Alpine peaks and the shimmering lake that are unmatched anywhere in the game. Built in the late 1920s on the orders of Benito Mussolini and designed by architect Giovanni Greppi, it was inaugurated on July 30, 1927 and named after an Italian rower and World War I hero. Como have played here since 1928.

After successive upgrades, increasing the capacity from 7,498 to around 12,000 over the last few years, the stadium is now set for a full-scale redevelopment, unveiled in February 2025 in collaboration with the Municipality of Como. Construction will begin in October 2027 and aims to modernise the venue while preserving its unique lakeside identity and historic character.

THE KIT

Como's identity has always been defined by blue. Founded in 1907, the club adopted royal blue from the outset, earning the nickname *Biancoblu* (white and blue). The home shirt has traditionally featured blue as the dominant colour with white shorts, though early iterations saw cross, striped and pelleted patterns. Red briefly appeared in 1926 after a merger with Esperia, and green was adopted in 1938 following another merger with AS Ardita. Since 2024, the kit has been manufactured by Adidas: it's a homecoming of sorts, as the German brand supplied Como during their golden Serie A years of the 1980s. Their shirt sponsors – Uber on the home kit, Revolut on the away – provide further evidence of the club's commercial potential.

THE TEAM

THE TACTICS

Como play patient, possession-based football with constant positional rotations. The base 4-2-3-1 is deceptive in its simplicity: in possession it transforms into a 2-3-4-1 or even a daring 2-3-5 in ultra-attacking mode.

Key to the system is the link player Perrone, who drops between the centre-backs to initiate build-up, while full-backs Vojvoda and Valle invert into midfield or push high depending on the phase of play. Paz operates as a free-roaming *trequartista*, connecting the midfield and attack with devastating through balls and set-piece delivery. Without the ball, Como employ an aggressive high press and maintain a high defensive line.

The system demands technical excellence, tactical intelligence and the versatility to interchange positions fluidly, qualities Fabregas has instilled in every member of his squad.

THE COACH

Cesc FABREGAS

Few footballers have transitioned from pitch to dugout with such natural authority as Fabregas. After a glittering 20-year playing career, winning the World Cup and two European Championships with Spain, and multiple club trophies with Arsenal, Barcelona, Chelsea and Monaco, his transition at Como, first as a player, then interim coach and now head coach, has been seamless.

His tactical philosophy blends Guardiola's control and positional play with Wenger's emphasis on technical fluidity, creating a Como side that plays some of the most attractive football in Italy. At just 38, he has guided the club to sixth in Serie A and a Coppa Italia semi-final, establishing himself as one of European football's most exciting young coaches.

STRONGEST XI

Jean BUTEZ
The Frenchman is integral to the setup. Technically excellent with the ball at his feet, he acts as an extra outfielder in the build-up play.

Mergim VOJVODA
Signed from Torino in February 2025, Vojvoda is first-choice right-back. A Kosovo international with over 70 caps, he brings experience, defensive solidity and calmness.

Jacobo RAMON
A revelation since joining from Real Madrid for €2.5m in 2025. Exceptional in one-on-ones and very comfortable on the ball.

Marc-Oliver KEMPF
The experienced German, signed from Hertha Berlin in 2024, offers leadership, aerial dominance and good long-range distribution.

Alex VALLE
Joined permanently from Barca for €6m in January 2025, Valle has blistering pace and a cultured left foot. Alternates between tucking inside and overlapping out wide.

Maximo PERRONE
Signed permanently for €13m after a successful loan from Manchester City, Perrone is Como's metronome, combining vision with work-rate. Debuted for Argentina in November.

Lucas DA CUNHA
Captain and midfield heartbeat, the Frenchman has grown into one of Serie A's most underrated players. Fabregas has converted him into a box-to-box midfielder who excels in pressing and transitional play.

Assane DIAO
Signed from Real Betis for €12m, Diao combines explosive pace with direct dribbling. His capacity to beat his man and deliver crosses makes him a constant threat. Spanish-raised Senegal international.

Nico PAZ
The jewel of the squad. Paz is the creative fulcrum, a left-footed magician with extraordinary vision, devastating set-piece delivery and the courage to attempt seemingly impossible defence-splitting passes.

Jesus RODRIGUEZ
The most expensive signing in Como's history at €22.5m from Real Betis, Rodriguez hugs the touchline before cutting inside onto his favoured right foot.

Anastasios DOUVIKAS
Signed from Celta Vigo for €14m, the Greece striker offers intelligent movement, clinical finishing and the ability to link up the play: precisely the modern centre-forward Fabregas demands.

BACK-UPS

Noel TORNQVIST
Giant Swedish goalkeeper who arrived from his home country in January after helping village club Mjallby win a sensational 2025 title.

Diego CARLOS
On loan from Fenerbahce, the ex-Aston Villa defender provides top-quality cover for Ramon and Kempf.

Ivan SMOLCIC
Croatian right-back or centre-back who often plays when Vojvoda is used in more advanced positions.

Ignace VAN DER BREMPT
Belgian right-back capable of inverting into midfield. A versatile and tactically intelligent player.

Sergi ROBERTO
A calming influence in midfield who also provides emergency right-back cover. Cesc's ex-Barca team-mate.

Maxence CAQUERET
Deep-lying playmaker, formerly of Lyon, who adds steel and energy to the side plus a powerful long shot.

Martin BATURINA
A versatile creative force with top technique. The destined heir to Nico Paz should the Argentine leave.

Nicolas KUHN
Signed from Celtic for €19m, the German winger's pace stretches defences late on in games as a sub.

Jayden ADDAI
The Dutch U21 winger, signed from AZ for €14m last July, is explosive, quick, unpredictable and full of flair.

Alvaro MORATA
Highly-regarded Spain captain who brings vast experience and pedigree to the squad and off-the ball movement to the attack.

Captain fantastic ...Hearts skipper Lawrence Shankland

THE FINAL STRAIGHT

Why the Scottish Premiership is enjoying its most exciting title race in years

Last season, Celtic won their 55th Scottish league title, drawing level with the all-time record held by their great rivals Rangers. This season, it seemed, would be a case of determining which of the great Glasgow clubs would collect number 56, assuming bragging rights of the city and the country. Given that Celtic have won 13 of the last 14, they were undeniable favourites, though for two fanbases that will always refuse to concede any ground, Rangers would never rule themselves out.

The idea of a third team crashing the party was unthinkable. Aberdeen, the last club from outside the Old Firm to be crowned Scottish champions, back in 1984-85 under Alex Ferguson, had shown the perils of flying too close to the sun last season. Joint-top with Celtic in November 2024, a catastrophic collapse over the Christmas period ended with them finishing in fifth.

Yet Hearts, who won the last of their four league crowns back in 1960, are not just in contention, they have set the pace. Even as their strong start turned into a sustained run of consistent form, some doubts remained. But as the team went into March on top, the last of those disappeared: Hearts are here to stay.

Adding to the picture are Motherwell, a fan-owned club with precisely one top-flight league title in their entire 140-year history, won way back in 1931-32. They have made a valuable contribution to one of the most thrilling title races in the history of Scottish football.

In April, the league splits in half for the run-in. With the finish line in sight, we've taken a look at the contenders.

Jostling for position...Glasgow giants Rangers and Celtic are battling to keep up with Hearts

HEARTS FULL OF HOPE

Ann Budge, the former chairwoman of Heart of Midlothian FC and now honorary president, has always been clear that the club cannot compete with Celtic and Rangers solely on financial grounds. "We had to be smarter," she says.

Under Budge, Hearts would never carry a gambling sponsor, so when Brighton owner Tony Bloom called in December 2023 about a partnership with his company, Jamestown Analytics, she approached with caution. He did not seem an obvious fit. But meeting him in person changed her mind. The discussion led to a £9.86 million investment for a 29% stake, not just capital, but a new venture.

Manager Derek McInnes, long admired by Budge, welcomed the news, seeing an opportunity to combine his 18 years in Scottish football management with fresh analytical insight. Hearts began the season with a 12-game unbeaten run, their longest in 27 years. For months, neither Celtic nor Rangers managed to beat them. The Ibrox side eventually did, in February, becoming only the fourth team all season to do so.

Hearts talisman ...Claudio Braga

Talisman Claudio Braga might never have reached Tynecastle without the analysis that conventional scouting overlooked. A prolific goalscorer in Norway's second tier with Aalesunds and a product of Portugal's lower leagues, he had already netted 12 goals by the start of March, repeatedly cutting teams open, often early and at key moments. His name is sung to the tune of Queen's "*Radio Ga Ga*", capturing an authentic bond with supporters that went viral.

Key investor...Tony Bloom

Braga and experienced centre-forward Lawrence Shankland have formed one of the league's most effective attacking partnerships, a key reason for Hearts' continued presence at the top of the table.

> Hearts went into March with their unbeaten home record still intact – Tynecastle has become a fortress

Manager... Derek McInnes

The latter had netted 11 goals himself by the spring, returning to form after a poor season last term. With creative players around him, such as Greek winger Alexandros Kyziridis, another data-driven pick, he has benefited from sharper service. Shankland's recent absence through injury underlined his importance to the team. Hearts function without him, but they flourish with him.

For many, the collective trauma of 1985-86 still lingers. On the final day of that season, Hearts needed only a draw against Dundee to secure the title. Two strikes by Dundee's Albert Kidd, combined with Celtic's 5-0 win against St Mirren, denied them the championship on goal difference. The year before that Alex Ferguson's Aberdeen finished top, the last time that a team outside the Celtic-Rangers duopoly won the league.

Ferguson is having an influence on the current season, too. "He [Ferguson] is good to give you little pointers and little nuggets of experience that he had in run-ins and things like that, so he's been good as gold," McInnes, who also used to manage Aberdeen, told *Sky Sports*. "Every conversation I have with him, I feel privileged and I always get something from it.

"He's done title wins and these sort of situations when there's a lot of high pressure, and obviously the irony is that it was his team who last won it [outside the Old Firm]."

McInnes will want to soak up as much knowledge as he can. The final stretch will test nerves, with likely trips to Celtic Park and Easter Road after the league splits. Recent defeats to St Mirren and Rangers stung, the latter especially because of what it represented while narrowing the gap. Yet it's important to remember that Hearts went into March with their unbeaten home record still intact – Tynecastle has become a fortress.

Budge captures the perspective. After all, they are already ahead of schedule; Bloom's involvement came with a caveat that it could take two, perhaps three or four, transfer windows before the team could compete for the title. But the ball must stay on the deck.

Asked if she would be disappointed if Hearts fell short, she is measured. "As long as we do well, it's about continuous improvement.

"Will I think we've failed if we put up a good fight and fall short? No. We'll fight harder next year."

Richard Purden

Rangers head coach... Danny Rohl

RANGERS ON A ROHL

When Russell Martin was fired by Rangers in early October, the club sat eighth in the table, trailing Hearts and Celtic by 11 and nine points respectively. The mood surrounding Ibrox was dark. Perhaps the darkest it had been since before the club returned to the top flight in 2016.

Fast-forward six months, however, and the mood is considerably brighter. Rangers find themselves right in the mix for a 56th league title and it is all thanks to Danny Rohl.

His appointment was met with some degree of scepticism from the fanbase. His managerial experience was limited to two years in charge of Sheffield Wednesday and, particularly after the poor performance of Martin, the fans were not in the mood for another of English football's cast-offs. Yet the German's high-pressing, possession-based style of play has galvanised the squad and moved the club to within striking distance of a first league title since 2020-21.

A 3-0 defeat to Brann in the Europa League proved to be a baptism of fire, demonstrating that there was plenty of work to be done. Yet four successive Premiership wins saw the Light Blues ascend up the table.

Progress was steady rather than spectacular. A 2-1 defeat to Hearts at Tynecastle four days before Christmas affirmed the Edinburgh side as genuine title contenders, while Rangers fell 12 points behind the leaders.

Between then and the start of spring, Rangers did not lose a single domestic game – spanning 14 matches – moving up to second in the table by March 1.

The 3-1 win over Celtic at Parkhead to begin 2026 was a seismic moment for Rohl and his side. Trailing 1-0 at the interval, the Gers hit three unanswered goals in the second half to seal all three points in a tempestuous derby.

The big games seem to bring out the best performances from the squad, as evidenced in the 4-2 victory over Hearts at Ibrox in mid-February, inspired by an impressive hat-trick from Portuguese starlet Youssef Chermiti.

The 21-year-old former Everton striker appears to thrive when the pressure is on. In January he netted twice against Celtic, then scored two more goals in the most recent Premiership Old Firm clash, including a stunning overhead kick. Of his first nine league goals, eight were scored against either Celtic or Hearts. His £8m price tag has been questioned numerous times since he moved to Scotland last summer, but there is no denying his quality when it matters.

Rohl has also managed to bring the best out of Emmanuel Fernandez. Like Chermiti, he failed to make much of an impact in the opening months. Now, he is arguably the best centre-back at the club, even chipping in with five league goals as well.

Rohl put his stamp on the squad in January with the signings of Ryan Naderi, Tochi Chukwuani and Tuur Rommens. The trio are all aged 22 and have impressed so far, offering plenty of promise for the future.

After the dismal start to the campaign, Rangers fans would have never expected to be in the hunt for the title by March, so their progress has been undeniably impressive. But Rohl has also shown signs of inexperience in recent weeks, with three successive away draws in the league in February denying them the chance to put further pressure on Hearts at the top of the table.

Their Jekyll and Hyde performance against Celtic at Ibrox – superb in the first half, disastrous in the second – could also prove costly.

If they can pull it off, this would go down as one of the club's sweetest title wins given the circumstances. But if not, Rohl has shown plenty of promise that they can compete again next season.

Ross Kilvington

CELTIC LOOK TO THE PAST

Back in the hot seat... Martin O'Neill

There are not enough words to do justice to Celtic's 2025-26 season or explain why it went so wrong for so long. Hubris from the club to its own supporters sowed the seeds of discontent among the fans. Amidst a backdrop of civil war among their own supporters, Celtic have been plagued by injuries and poor signings, of which there were plenty.

It took a familiar figure from the past to bring the club back into the title picture. Celtic have a history of turning to former players or managers in times of need. Billy McNeill did it in 1987-88, winning the double to add to his three titles before going to England. Neil Lennon and Brendan Rodgers are also on that list. Indeed, when Rodgers secured Celtic's 55th Scottish league crown last April with a stunning 5-0 win over Dundee United at Tannadice, the 13th title in 14 years, the future seemed green forever.

Martin O'Neill had been enjoying his media work. He was in Munich for Celtic's elimination from last season's Champions League by Bayern Munich, describing the performance as one Celtic's best European games in years. He would have been surprised to be told then that, less than a year later, he would be in charge of the team.

O'Neill never envisaged being manager of Celtic again, especially not 20 years after his first spell. It was a risk to his reputation built over five stellar seasons from 2000 to 2005. Now, the 74-year-old is repairing not just a team, but the support too. A boycott of the Scottish Cup tie at home to Dundee saw 20,000 fans stay away in protest over the running of the club and the banning of the Green Brigade ultras, home and away, since November.

Long-term injuries to Cameron Carter-Vickers, Alistair Johnston and Jota plagued the squad. Defeat on penalties to Kairat Almaty in the Champions League play-offs rang early alarm bells, and successive away defeats at Dundee and Hearts saw Rodgers resign on October 27. O'Neill was brought in as interim manager, with Shaun Maloney as assistant. He insisted the role, earmarked for Wilfried Nancy, was only temporary. But that was Celtic's biggest mistake. O'Neill should have been left in charge for the rest of the season. He more than steadied the ship with seven wins in eight games, including against Rangers in the League Cup semi-final and away to Feyenoord in the Europa League, both by 3-1 scorelines.

Nancy's wretched 33-day tenure saw six defeats in eight games, starting with a 2-1 setback at home to Hearts and a League Cup final loss to St Mirren. The 3-1 home defeat to Rangers in January was the end. The ex-Columbus Crew coach's insistence on playing a 3-5-2 formation – not what Celtic's players were used to – was folly.

> O'Neill never envisaged being manager of Celtic again, especially not 20 years after his first spell

O'Neill swiftly returned and he and Maloney have worked hard to quietly restore the players' confidence, notably Yang Hyun-jun, Arne Engels and Luke McCowan. He picked up where he left off in terms of results, knitting together a ten-match unbeaten run. The team showed plenty of fighting spirit, scoring lots of late goals, including one by free agent new signing Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain in the 2-1 victory over Livingston in February.

Title-winning pedigree ...Celtic captain Callum McGregor has won ten Premiership titles

But Celtic were brought crashing back down to earth by two shock home defeats: 4-1 to Stuttgart in the Europa League and 2-1 to Hibernian in the Premiership. The Bhoys salvaged some European pride by winning the second leg 1-0 in Germany and, three days later, they displayed that fighting spirit once again, recovering from being 2-0 down to earn that 2-2 draw at Ibrox.

There is no doubting O'Neill's influence in installing that spirit. He was there on the pitch at the end, on the occasion of his 74th birthday, to protect his players from the customary post-match row.

Kieran Tierney kickstarted the comeback with a header, his fifth league goal since the start of November, which, added to his strike for Scotland against Denmark in the World Cup qualifiers, has made this the most prolific spell of his career. More important than his goals, though, are the experience and leadership that he provides. He, along with captain Callum McGregor and winger James Forrest, were in the academy during O'Neill's first spell in charge, watching on as the team lifted trophy after trophy, a legacy that they have added to in their own playing days. It is that experience, also possessed by O'Neill and Maloney, which means Celtic cannot be ruled out.

Phil Gordon

WELL UP FOR IT

For all the talk of a three-horse title race, there is a fourth contender coming up on the rails.

In fact, Motherwell have stayed within touching distance of the top for most of the season. While the spotlight has so often fallen on the Old Firm clubs or the rise of Hearts, the team from Fir Park have taken points off all three of them. By combining the tightest defence in the league with the creativity of playmaker Elijah Just and the division's leading scorer, Tawanda Maswanhise, Motherwell have thrust themselves into the picture.

For their Danish manager Jens Berthel Askou, who joined the club last summer, it has been a remarkable first season. The 43-year-old has title-winning experience, first with Havnar Boltfelag in the Faroe Islands and again as assistant manager of FC Copenhagen last season.

On April 11, in the final game before the league splits, they travel to Tynecastle in a game that they must win to have any chance of staying in the title race.

Yet whatever the result, they have proven that they are capable of bloodying the noses of all of the other title contenders. Given that they will play all three again in the final phase of the season, they could have a decisive say in where the trophy ends up.

Jamie Evans

Leading scorer....Motherwell striker Tawanda Maswanhise

UWE ROSLER

"The Premier League now is not the league I knew as a player"

The iconic former Manchester City striker talks about his playing career, the differences between English and German football, and his current role as manager of VfL Bochum

Take us back to your early days playing in East Germany. Was a football career always on the cards?
Well, in terms of football, I was very privileged because I was accepted by a DFK, the elite sports academies in East Germany at the time. I had a very good upbringing in the game; we were very well trained in football skills, but also gained a good standard of education. Even as a player, I already knew I wanted to one day be a coach. I think it was the foundations that were laid back then that brought me to where I am now. When I moved to Nuremberg [from Dynamo Dresden in 1992] everything changed overnight, and I could fulfil my career ambition, which was to play in the English league, and at Manchester City.

Having played in Germany and England, you're in a perfect position to contrast and compare the Bundesliga and the Premier League...
The Premier League started very early, finding markets around the world where they could sell the television rights. And they promoted the product so much, generating so much revenue, that they have been able to afford the best coaches and the best players in the world; every player wants to play in the Premier League. The English top tier is, at the moment, by far the most competitive quality-wise. That makes it harder for countries like Germany, even though our football has a long history, and is competitive. But when it comes to income we cannot compete, which is hard.

But when it comes to pure fan culture, is Germany ahead? Does the 50+1 rule, where members hold a majority of voting rights at each club, help underpin that?
The 50+1 has a lot of advantages because it allows the fans to have a certain amount of influence on ticket prices, and other areas of input on how the clubs are run, like the ability to shape the atmosphere and culture in the stands. It is more open than in the English game. Also, the fans have some influence on the DFB, the national football federation, which is an advantage because it ensures they are heard and the game remains authentic here; that is the advantage.

How does that compare to the Premier League and its dynamic with the fans?
I think the Premier League now is not the league I knew as a player. Back then, everyone more or less could afford to buy a ticket, normal families, kids, working people. The people from the local communities who grew up supporting their local team could just go down to their home grounds and follow the games regularly. In these times, due to the cost of tickets, it is not possible anymore and that does make me a bit sad.

How does the over-commercialisation of the game affect you as a manager?
I am very much driven as a coach by my interactions with the fans, also by the atmosphere in the stadium. These days in England it can often be very flat; that's the price paid for a more corporate atmosphere, more VIP places and business suites and directors' boxes and so on. When you compare the atmosphere to German stadiums, there is a really big difference. German stadiums are supporter-powered; the chants, the choreographies, the sheer power of the experience, it's absolutely overwhelming, and we largely have the 50+1 to thank for that. However, the income achieved in the Premier League makes it difficult.

Jurgen Klopp has recommended establishing an Under-21 league for players, like Premier League 2, in Germany. Currently, Under-23 teams play in the third tier and below. What do you think of this proposal?
Teams like Freiburg or Stuttgart's Under-23s have, over many years, established themselves as a force in the third level, and that is good. As a young player, you need to have the physical challenge of playing against professionals of all ages; it's a big difference to play week in, week out against other academy players rather than playing in senior men's football. When you play in the third or fourth tier, football means results. It means everything – promotion, relegation – you are up against players for whom winning means being able to pay their bills and look after their family, that's where you learn the game, those lessons are invaluable. You need to leave it up to the clubs.

One criticism that is often levelled at the German league is that Bayern Munich are simply too dominant. Are you concerned about the lack of competitiveness of the Bundesliga?

VONOVIA
MIZUNO

Former Manchester City striker...Rosler scored 64 goals in 176 games for City between 1994 and 1998

Looking back on the last ten years, and how many times Bayern won the title, and this season again they are making winning the title look like a walk in the park, yes. I think that German football needs to get back to a situation like in past decades, where the title fight was between three or four teams. I think we have to get back to that.

You've played with and against a lot of legends, iconic names such as Michael Ballack, Glenn Hoddle, Ledley King, Peter Beardsley and Ulf Kirsten. What are your lasting memories of those who influenced you?

I had the privilege to play with all of those players you just mentioned, but I also played with players who were East Germany internationals who maybe didn't have the chance after unification to have a huge career in the top European leagues because they were over 30 when the reunification of Germany came about. But there were some top-class players. I never forget those players. In my first year as a professional player with Lokomotive Leipzig, we played in the European Cup Winners' Cup final, losing just 1-0 to Ajax in Athens. The quality on the side was very good indeed. I felt very privileged over the years to play with that calibre of people. I learnt so much from all of the players, but as they were over 30 most of them didn't get the chance to play in the top western leagues.

You're currently working with West Ham United and Northern Ireland striker Callum Marshall. How is he getting on? What potential do you see in him?

We signed Callum Marshall from West Ham on loan [in January] and were pleased to get him because I think there was a big demand for him from Championship and League One clubs. Several clubs wanted him and, as he is a player who can be successful in international football, we wanted him. From his perspective, the chance to play football abroad will improve him as a player. Living abroad will improve him culturally, and having to adapt to a different culture will also push him to grow. I'm excited to see how Callum will play and how we can use his skills. He has fought his way into the team already and, especially against Schalke, he had a tremendous game.

You chose to take on VfL Bochum in October last year. It's a respected, working-class club from the industrial Ruhr Valley, but one struggling in the second tier. What made you decide to take on the role?

Yes, when I joined the club we had one win in eight games and just three points; it was enormously risky. The chance of staying up was not that high. But then, in the following 13 games, we only lost twice. We have made a huge step. We are up to eighth in the league [at the time of speaking in mid-February]. We are still in a relegation battle because we are only five points from the relegation zone; one win more or one less can make a big difference to our standing. So, from that perspective, we still need to be incredibly focused and keep up the intensity, and focus very clearly on avoiding relegation.

I analysed the squad, and I felt I could get more out of them than what they had shown so far. I knew the intense football atmosphere in Bochum from when I was a player playing against them, for example with Dynamo Dresden. There is an incredible

> "I'm a big fan of Thomas Tuchel...the appointment as a foreigner to the England job is a big ask, maybe it's the hardest job of all, but Thomas has a big track record"
>
> Rosler on Thomas Tuchel excelling as England head coach

Turnaround...Rosler has helped lead Bochum back up the table since taking charge in October

intensity here; the chants from the stands, the passion for the game, it's inspiring. I remember an incredibly tense game under the floodlights in the 1990s. I will never forget that atmosphere. When I had the chance to take on the club, I took it, and let's see what we can do.

Finally, as a coach with experience in the game in England and Germany, what do you make of Thomas Tuchel in his role as England national team head coach?
I'm a big fan of Thomas Tuchel. I saw what he did with Chelsea in the space of two weeks after he took over from Frank Lampard. He completely changed the shape and playing philosophy, and made them vastly more competitive. That was a transformation. I thought it was not possible to have such an impact on a team in such a short space of time. I think his success with Chelsea, including winning the Champions League, shows what he can do in England. When the FA hired him, they wanted someone who could take the side further than [Gareth] Southgate. You can see that in qualifying, they have not lost. The appointment as a foreigner to the England job is a big ask, maybe it's the hardest job of all, but Thomas has a big track record. He will find it very interesting to manage such a talented pool of players. He has the authority and grabs the bull by the horns but, if anyone can make it, then it's Thomas. I wish him the best with it.

Interview by Benjamin McFadyean

Enthusiastic...Rosler is as energetic as ever on the touchline as he instructs his players

Bochum fans...a banner at Bochum's Vonovia Ruhrstadion reads: "No to investment in the DFL (German Football League)"

BUBISTA

"We can compete with the best, regardless of our country's size"

Cape Verde's head coach reflects on his team's historic World Cup qualification and looks forward to this summer's finals

What was the turning point during the World Cup qualifiers?
We had several difficult, or should I say, decisive moments. But I think our mentality shifted slightly; the team felt that we could actually make it. It was after the match we lost in Cameroon, and the home game against Libya. We won and I think that was it. That was when the team felt we could go toe-to-toe with any other opponent and that we had what it takes to reach the end and secure qualification.

How did you feel after the final whistle in the victory over Eswatini, which ensured qualification for the World Cup?
It was a feeling of immense pride. Primarily because it was a victory for the people – those in Cape Verde and those living abroad. Our diaspora has been incredibly important to us. They've been our "12th man," as we like to say. This qualification belongs to the whole nation. Obviously, we feel satisfied for ourselves and our families, remembering the tough times we went through along the way. It was a feeling of great pride and a huge sense of relief to know our people were experiencing a moment of pure happiness.

What is missing for more Cape Verdeans to ply their trade at top clubs in Europe?
I believe we are on the right track. Previously, we faced many difficulties because players began their journeys in Cape Verde, where we didn't yet have grass pitches. Consequently, we struggled when we moved to Europe or other parts of the world. But nowadays, with the children of Cape Verdeans spread across the globe, we have great players – sons of national team players. Now, we are creating the conditions to have players at a very high level as well. We have a player who recently signed for Benfica [Sidny Lopes Cabral], and we have examples of players in Spain, like at Villarreal [Logan Costa]. We have two players in the Championship who are part of the national team setup [Sidnei Tavares at Blackburn Rovers and Ricardo Santos at Swansea City]. We have players in every corner of the world and we are becoming more and more far-reaching. This all means we have a greater depth of talent to choose from. We are just missing a "click" so to speak, so that we can have players in the Premier League and the top leagues around the world, which will also allow our national team to take that next step.

You select a lot of players from the diaspora. How do you maintain the team's core identity?
Fortunately, we also have many players who started in Cape Verde, were born there, and began their sporting careers there. They have a very strong connection to the islands, which helps us maintain our identity. As for the other players who are children of Cape Verdeans living in Europe or elsewhere abroad, they also have a very strong sense of identity, as Cape Verdeans never lose their roots. Even those born outside the country have Cape Verde deep in their hearts. All the players speak our language, Creole, which is the official language within the national team. All the players eat cachupa, our national dish. What we do is foster a sense of brotherhood within the squad.

Can you explain how searching for diaspora players works in practice?
Nowadays, most players of Cape Verdean descent already put the flag in their social media profiles, which makes it much easier to find them. But in the past, we had to do a much more detailed search. But also, thanks to the many friends we have across the globe, we can always get accurate information about players or descendants out there. Then, we make our approach and carry out our scouting quietly. We know that today almost everyone wants to come and play for the national team, and that is a source of satisfaction for the whole country. Even the younger ones, the 16 or 17-year-olds, already want to come and join. Seeing that in the youth setups is a cause for great satisfaction and pride. Because of this, our national team will have many more options and many more quality players who have come through different systems – European academies and those from other continents. This makes our squad and our football much more well-rounded and gives us better chances of being able to fight for a place in major competitions and reach the final stages of big tournaments.

The story of Roberto "Pico" Lopes' call-up is well known – you made initial contact via LinkedIn. How exactly did you find him?
Someone from the national team setup took the opportunity to send him a message asking if he would be interested in representing us. I know his father perfectly well and after he replied, it was straightforward. We are very happy with Pico because he's a player who didn't speak a word of Creole at first, but by his second call-up, he was already speaking it. Essentially, he is a player who represents the country with dignity, character and desire. He's paved the way for other players of Cape Verdean descent to start seeking out the national team.

How would you describe your philosophy as a manager?
I like organised teams that are mentally tough and that step onto the pitch knowing exactly what they need to do. That's essentially my philosophy. Naturally, I value unity; I want a team where everyone fights for one another and where they can show their individual talent within the organisation of the team.

tempo
FCF
tempo

And from a tactical perspective, what is your vision?
Tactically, as I mentioned, I like organised teams, but I want them to have no fear of attacking. We know the objective is always to win. Regardless of who the opponent is, our approach is always to stay organised and go for the win. We will do exactly that at the World Cup. Obviously, we will face world-class teams – some of the best in their respective continents. However, our philosophy is very clear. We proved that during our qualifying campaign. Our confidence is not defined by the fact that we are a small nation. We want to demonstrate that at the World Cup and show other small countries who haven't qualified yet that they can do it too. Size defines nothing in football. To answer your question: the most important thing is organisation, unity and having the courage to use our individual talent for the benefit of the team to chase a win in every single match.

What do you think Cape Verde can realistically achieve at the World Cup?
We have a responsibility to show countries that are smaller or have fewer financial resources that many things are levelled out once you step onto the pitch. We have total respect for the teams we will face. Spain are the top team in the world rankings; they are former world and European champions. Then you have Uruguay, who have won the World Cup and the Copa America many times, as well as Saudi Arabia, one of the best teams in Asia. But we want to show our identity as a team – to show that we can compete with the best, regardless of our country's size. I am certain we will do this with a clear identity and the utmost dignity.

Former player...Bubista won over 20 caps for his country

Cape Verde has a huge diaspora in the United States, but how many of your supporters will make it?
We are facing difficulties right now, mainly the struggle to obtain entry visas for the United States. It's becoming a very serious problem for people here who want to travel there.

But as I said, we have a massive diaspora, and in the US specifically. So, we are certain that at our matches, we will have a large community to support us. It's not just about support inside the stadium, but supporting us throughout the competition with their positive energy. We know of the warmth of the Cape Verdean people so, in that regard, it's a real shame there are these visa hurdles. Even the tickets are pricey. But wherever we go, we are sure to have Cape Verdeans with us.

Heading to North America ...Roberto "Pico" Lopes and Garry Rodrigues celebrate Cape Verde's World Cup qualification

National team boss... Bubista has been in charge since 2020

Does the current political context worry you?
It does worry me. In this case, for our fans – especially those in Cape Verde or those outside the US – it is quite concerning. I don't know what will happen from here on out. We are a nation of immigration, obviously. We have a lot of migration, and many people haven't had their legal status finalised yet. We have a lot of difficulties with the many people here in Cape Verde who want to go to the matches, but the visa situation has worsened recently. So it worries me on a personal level too because, as I've said before, this qualification belongs to our people. We want them to feel the happiness of experiencing it. Let's see if things improve by then so that people have the chance to be in the United States and enjoy the atmosphere of our matches.

> "It's not just about football, it's about putting our country on the map"

How can Cape Verde consolidate after the World Cup and ensure this qualification isn't just a one-off?
I think that beyond the qualification itself, it's about the foundations we are building to make this sustainable over time. It can't be a one-off event where we say: "we qualified, and that's it." We have to consolidate everything we are doing so it bears fruit in the future. We need to create the conditions to be in major competitions consistently so our country becomes well known. It's not just about football, it's about putting our country on the map to boost tourism and bring more investment here, so our younger players have the facilities to compete with the big teams. It will take some time to reach full professionalism, but it will improve conditions for young players. If we have the means to develop our youth, we can better equip them. But it's about more than just the World Cup, it's about everything that benefits our country. Our flag will be flying among the top sporting nations, which increases global respect for our country and attracts investors and sponsors to our football. It means more support for youth development, inspiring new generations, and increasing the value of our talent. It's about much more than just the game.

What differences do you see in Cape Verdean football today compared to your playing days?
I think our mentality is much better nowadays. We have always had talent in our country, both at home and abroad, but perhaps our mindset was a little bit behind. Today, we have incredibly talented players who are at big clubs and playing in many different countries. This means our mentality is now better suited for major tournaments and winning matches. We compete in the toughest environments across Africa and we know what that requires in terms of mental strength. We have to consistently maintain a much higher level of focus to gain an advantage. I believe our mentality is the main change, because the talent has always been there.

Interview by Samindra Kunti

Award winner ...Bubista was CAF's Coach of the Year for 2025

Glenn Moore

Biggest-ever NWSL season kicks off

More teams and higher salaries make this year's NWSL the biggest ever

After a sometimes-difficult off-season, the US-based National Women's Soccer League was glad to return to the pitch in mid-March for its 14th season.

This will be the largest yet with two expansion teams taking the league to 16 clubs, spread across 14 states. The arrival of Boston Legacy brings NWSL back to New England, which hosted Boston Breakers for the league's first five seasons, while Denver Summit become the first team in Colorado. Both will start in NFL stadiums – the homes of the New England Patriots and Denver Broncos respectively – which is not ideal with capacities of 65,000 and 76,000, but there are plans in place for more suitable long-term venues.

Denver look the more likely to settle quickly. Nick Cushing, a WSL title winner at Manchester City, is their inaugural head coach. His squad includes experienced France keeper Pauline Peyraud-Magnin and a core of NWSL veterans such as forward Ally Brazier (ex-Orlando Pride), left-back Carson Pickett (ex-Pride), central defender Kaleigh Kurtz (ex-North Carolina Courage) and Canada's Megan Reid (ex-Angel City). The star recruit, though, is US captain Lindsey Heaps, a Colorado native, with the midfielder set to join from OL Lyonnes once the European season is over.

Boston do not have anyone of that stature but their squad has internationals from at least nine countries headlined by Canada forward Nichelle Prince, Colombia centre-back Jorelyn Carabali and Brazil attacker Amanda Gutierres. They will be coached by Portuguese Filipa Patao, formerly of Benfica, where she won five consecutive league championships.

Heaps' return is good news for a league that had become so concerned by the loss of talent across the Atlantic they asked the English coach of the US national team Emma Hayes whether she had been encouraging it. Hayes responded that the decision was up to individual players. Higher wages and the lure of Champions League football had drawn a full line-up of US players to England and France, the latest notable ones being Alyssa Thompson (Chelsea) and Sam Coffey (Manchester City).

Add in Gotham FC's shock loss to Corinthians in the inaugural Women's Champions Cup semi-final, and NWSL has suffered a blow to its self-esteem.

But the league fought back by introducing the High Impact Player (HIP) rule, allowing clubs to spend $1 million above the salary cap on players meeting a somewhat random set of criteria. That enabled Washington Spirit to hold on to the biggest star of all, Trinity Rodman, on a reported $2m salary. Some reports claim that this has made her the highest-paid female player in the world, although others suggest that it remains Aitana Bonmati at Barcelona.

> This will be the largest NWSL season yet with two expansion teams taking the league to 16 clubs

Either way, holding on to Rodman was extremely important. With Sophia Wilson (Portland Thorns) and Mallory Swanson (Chicago Stars) both returning from maternity leave, the "Triple Espresso" forward line that spearheaded the US gold medallists at the Paris 2024 Olympics will soon be back on the field.

Title favourites... Kansas City Current fell short in last year's play-offs

Not everyone was happy with HIP. The players association promptly filed a grievance arguing that it violated the collective bargaining agreement. Nevertheless, its influence is already clear, with $1m moves for rising stars Croix Bethune (Washington to Kansas City Current) and Claire Hutton (Kansas to Bay FC) likely to involve the salary cap workaround.

Those deals signalled a slight remodelling of the Kansas City Current team after an anticlimactic end to last season, when they topped the table in record-breaking style only to lose in the first round of the play-offs.

The man who oversaw that rollercoaster season, Vlatko Andonovski, will now concentrate fully on the role of global sporting director with Chris Armas, a former US international with a mixed record in MLS management, coming in as head coach.

Armas is one of seven new coaches this season, including the two expansion clubs, meaning that only four of the coaches have been in situ since the start of the 2024 season.

This churn reflects the inevitable scrutiny and pressure that results from the rapidly rising investment in clubs. When Angel City and San Diego Wave signed up to start the 2022 season, they paid around $2m each in expansion fees; four years on, Denver laid out $110m to join the party. They will also be building a 14,500-capacity soccer-specific stadium, with an estimated cost of $150m-$225m with the city contributing $50m.

Star recruit... US captain Lindsey Heaps is unveiled by NWSL newcomers Denver Summit

Add in a purpose-built training complex and the ownership group will be lucky to see any change from $300m. For that money, people expect results.

Who is most likely to achieve them this season? Kansas, even with the changes, ought to be high in the mix given their manifest superiority last season. Michele Kang's cash should ensure that Spirit, last year's runners-up in both the regular season and the play-offs, keep their level high. Seb Hines' Orlando have been impressively consistent in recent years, Laura Harvey's Seattle are usually in the frame and Gotham, though eighth in the regular season, are defending champions.

There are plenty of other plotlines too. Crystal Dunn, a World Cup winner and Olympic gold medallist with the US team, has retired at the age of 33 but Marta, now 40, is still going strong at Orlando.

Italy captain, Cristiana Girelli, has signed for Bay FC on loan from Juventus – joining fellow *Azzurre* Sofia Cantore, Lucia di Guglielmo (both Spirit) and Lisa Boattin (Houston Dash) in the NWSL.

Both Gotham and Spirit will pause in mid-May to head south of the Rio Grande to contest the last four of the CONCACAF W Champions Cup, drawn against Mexican clubs America and Pachuca respectively in an intriguing dual test of cross-border strength. A month later, Gotham play Kansas in the NWSL Challenge Cup.

By then the men's World Cup will be well underway adding one last uncertainty. Will five weeks of high-profile men's soccer aid the women's game in the United States, or push it to the shadows?

Round-up

Postponed...Nigeria will have to wait to defend their WAFCON title

WAFCON REARRANGED AT THE LAST MINUTE

The 16th Women's Africa Cup of Nations was postponed 12 days before it was scheduled to open on March 17 in Morocco.

Rumours began to circulate in February that the north African nation, which seven months earlier had hosted the delayed WAFCON 2024, wanted to push the event back and that CAF was seeking alternative hosts.

This was denied by CAF up until March 5, when they announced a rescheduling due to "unforeseen circumstances".

The competition, which had been expanded to 16 teams in November 2025 (after qualifying had finished), will now be played from July 25 until August 16. It will also serve as Africa's World Cup qualification.

GRUDGE MATCHES IN UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

The last eight of the UEFA Champions League will feature a London derby and a *Clasico* after holders Arsenal brushed aside OH Leuven 7-1 on aggregate in the knockout round play-offs and Real Madrid saw off Paris FC 5-2.

Arsenal now meet Chelsea while Madrid will take on Barcelona. In the other ties, Manchester United, who reached their first quarter-final with a 5-0 aggregate defeat of Atletico Madrid, play Bayern Munich while Wolfsburg, who beat Juventus 4-2 over two legs, face OL Lyonnes.

The quarter-final ties take place March 24/25 and April 1/2.

Semi-final draw (April 25-26 & May 2-3)
Arsenal/Chelsea v Wolfsburg/Lyonnes
Manchester United/Bayern Munich v Real Madrid/Barcelona

PSG punished... Florianne Jourde

CRUX ADD ROSENGARD, BAY FC LOOK AT SUNDERLAND

Five months after purchasing French club Montpellier, MCO group Crux Football added their second club. The group, headlined by former New Zealand international Rebecca Smith, purchased Swedish side Rosengard.

In other MCO news, Bay FC owners Bay Collective have been in talks to acquire a majority stake in WSL2 club

Eyes on Barcelona... Real Madrid stars Linda Caicedo and Eva Navarro

Sunderland, while two major sports stars have purchased small stakes in English clubs: three-time US Open tennis champion Kim Clijsters in Birmingham City and NBA superstar Giannis Antetokounmpo, of the Milwaukee Bucks, at Chelsea.

POINTS DEDUCTION HITS PSG

Paris Saint-Germain lost an appeal against a nine-point sanction imposed for fielding Florianne Jourde without an International Transfer Certificate.

PSG's defence was that the Canada international had been playing for the non-professional University of Southern California, but it transpired she needed an ITC having previously played in a Canadian league. Three league wins were converted to 3-0 defeats.

With the deduction jeopardising their chances of playing in next season's Champions League, the club have been considering further appeals, including potentially to the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

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80

PLUS

Preview... the final round of Asian Cup qualifying

NEWS

80 2027 Asian Cup qualifiers & Finalissima
82 AFCON 2027 qualifying
84 CAF Champions League
86 AFC Champions League Elite
88 Canadian Premier League
90 Sudan Premier League
92 OFC Champions League

THE SWEEPER

94 Tales from the 211

RESULTS, TABLES, FIXTURES

95 Club football
98 Internationals

82

AFCON 2027...preliminary qualifiers ready for kick-off

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

5 Things...

...from Asian football

1 TAJIKISTAN AND TURKMENISTAN CAN ADD TO CENTRAL ASIA JOY

Uzbekistan qualified for their debut World Cup last year, becoming the first team from Central Asia to compete on the global stage. Neighbours Kyrgyzstan have already booked their place in the 2027 Asian Cup and it would be special indeed if, at the continental tournament next January, there could be four from the hitherto little-covered region.

Heading into the final qualifiers in late March, Tajikistan, who reached the last eight in what was their debut appearance at the 2023 edition, have the best chance with a home tie against the Philippines. Both countries have 13 points after five games and Tajikistan will go through with a win or with a goalless, 1-1 or 2-2 draw; if more goals are scored than that, it gets a little complicated.

Turkmenistan only need a draw to go through, but they face a tricky trip to Bangkok against a Thailand team, now led by English coach Anthony Hudson, desperate for the win and revenge after losing the reverse fixture 3-1 in June.

2 LEBANON LOOKING FOR RARE GOOD NEWS

There has not been much to smile about in Lebanese football in recent years. The local league has been stop-start, clubs have struggled to make ends meet, and football authorities deem that the security situation means that the national team's home games must be hosted overseas.

A place at the 2027 Asian Cup would be a step in the right direction, and the Cedars are in a great position to make it. There was some good fortune in the draw as they were given an accommodating group containing Bhutan and Brunei as well as the only real competition Yemen, their final opponent.

A draw next up will be enough for Lebanon and perhaps a much-needed turning point after a disappointing World Cup qualification campaign that saw the team finish third in their group behind Australia and Palestine and only score in two out of six games.

3 UPS AND DOWNS OF CHINESE FOOTBALL

In January, China's Under-23 team reached the final of the Asian Cup. For a nation that had never progressed past the group stage before on its five previous finals appearances, this was a stunning success especially as no goals were conceded on the way there.

Asian Cup bow...Central Asian outfit Tajikistan reached the quarter-finals on their debut two years ago

Ups of Chinese football...China players celebrate with goalkeeper Li Hao during the recent Under-23 Asian Cup

Finalissima holders...Argentina won the last edition in 2022 after beating Italy 3-0 at Wembley

Qingdao West Coast goalkeeper Li Hao – the "Great Wall of China" – was the breakout star of an exciting new crop of players that also includes Wolverhampton Wanderers new boy Xu Bin as well as Hu Hetao (Chengdu Rongcheng), Wang Yudong and Liu Haofan (both Zhejiang).

In the final, Japan ran out 4-0 winners but there was enough there to give long-suffering fans in China some cause for optimism that some of the investment in youth development are finally starting to bring dividends.

But then, in late January, nine Chinese Super League teams were deducted points ahead of the new season due to "improper financial transactions", including six of last year's top seven. High-ranking officials have been banned for life and this is all part of a long-running attempt from the authorities to clamp down on "match-fixing, gambling, and corruption." It has overshadowed the start of the 2026 season.

4 QATAR'S FINALISSIMA DREAMS HIT BY REALITY

In 2022, Argentina defeated Italy 3-0 in London in the first Finalissima – the clash between the champions of South America and Europe – since the 20th century. But in 2026, the action switches to Qatar. Or it was supposed to.

Just days after missiles and bombs started flying around the region, with some falling on the 2022 World Cup hosts, all football in Qatar came to a halt. There was real excitement at the prospect of Spain and Argentina coming to the Lusail Stadium where Lionel Messi lifted the World Cup trophy just over three years earlier. But those hopes were in danger of being dashed.

At the time of writing, a decision had yet to be made. "Discussions are ongoing with the local organisers who have made a tremendous effort to ensure the match is a success," said UEFA, who organises the game alongside CONMEBOL.

Due to security concerns, it looks increasingly likely that the game will take place elsewhere in what would be a blow to the country, where fans have become accustomed to the tiny territory hosting tournament after tournament.

5 LOTS OF HOSTING INTEREST IN 2031 AND 2035

The Asian Cup has been held in the western side of the continent for three of the last four editions – Qatar in 2011 and 2023, and the United Arab Emirates in 2019 – and will be hosted in Saudi Arabia next year.

That means the next two tournaments are likely to be different, with plenty of interest from different regions.

South Korea, Japan, Kuwait, Indonesia and Australia have all thrown their hats into the ring. India also want the event and, perhaps most interestingly of all, there is a joint-Central Asian bid. Three nations – Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – are ready to work together. That would be quite the trip for fans.

The deadline for associations to submit their final bid is June 30, 2026.

Stadium Australia ...Sydney will host the Women's Asian Cup later this year

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Eritrea set to return to international fold

Bar any last-minute withdrawal, the isolated East African country will take part in qualifying for the 2027 Africa Cup of Nations

Experience suggests that we will not know for sure if Eritrea's return to international football is confirmed until a few days before their first scheduled fixture.

Africa's hermit country has again entered the Africa Cup of Nations qualifiers, setting up the tantalising possibility that, for the first time, all 54 African member nations will compete in the competition.

The Red Sea state was drawn to take on Eswatini over two legs in the preliminary round that marks the start of the 2027 Cup of Nations qualifiers. It is scheduled to be their first competitive outing in more than six years; Eritrea has repeatedly eschewed opportunities to compete in World Cup and Cup of Nations qualification due to players consistently defecting while on away trips. They and Russia were the only FIFA members not to take part in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers.

Human Rights Watch says that the Eritrean government has "maintained an iron grip on its population at home and abroad", with movement out of the country near impossible. "It continued to repress the population's rights, including freedom of opinion, religion, and expression, and forced much of its adult population into indefinite military/national service," continues HRW of the Eritrean state.

National team and players from other representative teams have been defecting for almost two decades, with an estimated 80 footballers running away from the team while on trips

Eschewed opportunities... Eritrea last took part in AFCON qualifying in 2008

outside of the country. There were defections in Angola in 2007, Kenya in 2009, Tanzania in 2011, Uganda in 2012, Botswana in 2015 (following a World Cup qualifier) and Uganda again in 2019. Most of the players seeking political asylum have never played seriously again.

Eritrea has not allowed teams to travel outside the country since members of its Under-20 side fled to Uganda in 2019 but now seems to have had a change of heart, slowly emerging from the self-imposed exile. Even so, it was a surprise in February when the Council for East and Central Africa Football Associations (CECAFA) voted Eritrea Football Federation boss Paulos Weldehaimanot Andemariam to head their new executive committee for the next four years.

Last May, there was a visit by a team from Niger to Eritrea for two matches and then in March, in the build-up to the 2027 Cup of Nations qualifiers, Eritrea hosted South Sudan in a warm-up friendly, which was their first international since 2020.

Elsewhere, Somalia have also faced challenges in competing on the international stage. Civil strife means they have not hosted a match in the capital Mogadishu in three decades, but their return to international football continues with increasing ambition, even if the results are not coming. The Somalis are up against Mauritius, having won only one of their last 23 internationals, but continue to search worldwide for footballers with Somali heritage that can help strengthen their squad.

Former African champions Ethiopia have seen their world ranking plummet alarmingly after winning only twice in ten World Cup qualifiers, and now they must take on Sao Tome & Principe in something of an indignity for a past Cup of Nations winner (back in 1962). In January, Ethiopia appointed the 60-year-old Yohannes Sahle as their new head coach, hoping he can revive their fortunes.

Lesotho also have a new coach in Bob Mafoso and will likely be too strong for the Seychelles, although the two teams drew 1-1 when they last met at the 2024 COSAFA Cup in South Africa. That, though, was the only time in the past three years where the Indian Ocean island nation managed to avoid defeat. Their final two games in the World Cup qualifiers last November saw them lose by seven goals to both the Ivory Coast and then Gambia.

Qualifying for the 2027 finals begins in late March with a two-legged home-and-away preliminary round, featuring the bottom 12 countries in the FIFA rankings. The six winners will advance to the group stage, along with Africa's 42 top-ranked teams, to be divided into 12 groups of four. The top two in each group then qualify for the finals, except in those groups where already-qualified co-hosts Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda are drawn to play.

Defections...Eritrean players fled during a trip to Uganda in 2012 for the regional CECAFA Cup tournament

Seeking asylum... ten of Eritrea's squad from a 2015 trip to Botswana sought political asylum

Eritrea has repeatedly eschewed opportunities to compete in World Cup and Cup of Nations qualification due to players consistently defecting while on away trips

PRELIMINARY ROUND DRAW

Djibouti v South Sudan
Chad v Burundi
Somalia v Mauritius
Seychelles v Lesotho
Eritrea v Eswatini
Sao Tome & Principe v Ethiopia

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Update

History makers ...Stade Malien finished top of Group D

Stade Malien make CAF Champions League history

Bamako-based outfit become the first-ever Malian club to advance from the group stage of Africa's Champions League

Malian teams have competed in Africa's top club competition since the first edition in 1965, when Stade Malien were runners-up. A year later, another Malian side reached the final, with Real Bamako collecting a silver medal. But for decades now, Mali's clubs have battled to emulate the heights of those formative days.

Now though, there are signs of a revival. Last season, Djoliba became the first club from Mali to qualify for the 16-team group phase since the Champions League format was introduced in 1997. They found the going tough and did not win a match, but this season Stade Malien fared much better. *Les Blancs* emerged as the surprise packages of this season's group phase, topping their standings and advancing to the last eight.

It was a remarkable step forward. This is the 20th time that Stade Malien had qualified for the Champions League, but on the previous 19 occasions they had failed to get past the preliminary knockout rounds. After finally succeeding in making it to the group stage, they did not rest on their laurels. They topped Group D with an impressive 11-point haul, making sure of their progress in the penultimate game by beating perennial favourites Esperance 1-0 in Bamako.

Daouda Coulibaly's second goal of the tournament (including the qualifying rounds) was enough for the win and for the Tunisian giants to sack their coach Maher Kanzari.

That sort of knee-jerk reaction is often the downfall of North African teams. Despite the defeat, Esperance were still in the hunt to qualify and one week later they did just that, securing second place in the group by edging closest rivals Petro Atletico of Angola 2-0. Frenchman Christian Bacconi was caretaker coach as they went through to the quarter-finals for the tenth season in a row.

Egyptian giants Al Ahly, now coached by Jess Thorup from Denmark, also made it to a tenth successive quarter-finals while compatriots and holders Pyramids also made sure of progress with a game to spare.

Pyramids, winners of last season's Champions League in only their second appearance, matched the record haul of 16 points from six group games which had been set by Mamelodi Sundowns four years ago.

Pyramids were brimming with confidence as they finished six points clear of runners-up Renaissance Berkane of Morocco in Group A. It included an impressive 4-1 away victory over Rivers United in Nigeria and comes despite selling some of last season's top performers, like striker Ibrahim Adel to the United Arab Emirates and midfielder Blati Toure to Libya.

Group B was also topped by an Egyptian side followed by a Moroccan, as Al Ahly finished one point ahead of Royal Armed Forces. The pair finished their fixtures in mid-February with a tempestuous goalless draw in Cairo that saw the visiting team's players pelted with objects by the Egyptian fans. Given what happened at the Africa Cup of Nations final in Rabat, it is expected the Confederation of African Football will come down hard on Al Ahly and they could play key Champions League home games behind closed doors.

Al Hilal of Sudan were the other group winners, finishing two points above second-placed Sundowns in Group C. The South African champions have now made it eight successive continental appearances in a row but are still searching for success to add to their only previous triumph in 2016.

Al Hilal continue to defy the difficulty of being in exile, based this season in Rwanda where they compete in the local league and also host their Champions League home games in Kigali. They lost only one of their six group games to the delight of their Romanian coach Laurentiu Reghecampf. "All the teams were very difficult. We played against Mamelodi Sundowns, the finalists of last year's Champions League, and we won four points. We played against MC Alger, a team which invested a lot of money, and they have an amazing team and fans. Lupopo weren't easy to play against because they have good players and they can put you under stress. It was a very strong group."

Sundowns had to beat Mouloudia Alger 2-0 in Pretoria in their last game to advance as the runners-up, which also lifted a lot of pressure off Portuguese coach Miguel Cardoso. He had been the subject of fan ire as Sundowns struggled through the group fixtures. Cardoso was coach of Esperance when they finished runners-up in 2024 and then Sundowns when they lost in last season's final.

Stade Malien emerged as the surprise packages of this season's group phase, topping their standings and advancing to the last eight

Sacked...Maher Kanzari led Esperance at last summer's Club World Cup

Holders...Egyptian outfit Pyramids topped their group with a joint-record points tally

THE STANDINGS

GROUP A

	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Pyramids	6	5	1	0	+12	16
2	RS Berkane	6	3	1	2	+2	10
3	Power Dynamos	6	2	1	3	-3	7
4	Rivers United	6	0	1	5	-11	1

GROUP B

	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Al Ahly	6	2	4	0	+5	10
2	AS FAR	6	2	3	1	+1	9
3	Young Africans	6	2	2	2	+1	8
4	JS Kabylie	6	0	3	3	-7	3

GROUP C

	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Al Hilal	6	3	2	1	+2	11
2	Mamelodi Sundowns	6	2	3	1	+3	9
3	MC Alger	6	2	1	3	-1	7
4	Saint-Eloi Lupopo	6	1	2	3	-4	5

GROUP D

	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Stade Malien	6	3	2	1	+3	11
2	Esperance	6	2	3	1	+2	9
3	Petro Atletico	6	1	3	2	-3	6
4	Simba	6	1	2	3	-2	5

KNOCKOUT DRAW

QUARTER-FINALS

RS Berkane v Al Hilal
Esperance v Al Ahly
Mamelodi Sundowns v Stade Malien
AS FAR v Pyramids

SEMI-FINALS

QF 4 winner v QF 1 winner
QF 2 winner v QF 3 winner

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

AFC CL debutants ...Machida Zelvia topped the table in their first season

Tractor disrupt Saudi dominance while Japan lead the east

The league phase of the Asian Champions League Elite concludes with clubs from Saudi Arabia and Japan leading the way, but conflict in the Middle East raises uncertainty over west region knockout rounds

It has taken a while and a lot of football but 24 teams that started out in the AFC Champions League Elite were finally whittled down to 16 in February.

The two 12-team groups are split along geographic lines with the top eight from each going through to the last 16. In the western zone, there were very few surprises, but the region has since been plunged into uncertainty due to the US-Israeli conflict with Iran and the subsequent situation that has engulfed the Middle East. The four second-round games in the west have been postponed – the east is unaffected – and may end up being just single matches instead of the scheduled two legs.

"We were supposed to go to Dubai but now we have to wait," said Jorge Jesus, head coach of Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr, who face similar problems in the AFC Champions League Two. "It's all due to the political situation and we have to follow the AFC in this matter and see what happens."

In the Elite group stage, there were hints of a major shock initially with Al Ittihad struggling at the start.

The 2004 and 2005 champions lost their first two games, which contributed to Laurent Blanc getting shown the door. Under Sergio Conceicao, the Jeddah club, who lost Karim Benzema and N'Golo Kante in February, recovered and sealed the deal with a 7-0 win over Al Gharafa of Qatar in the penultimate round.

The Tigers were never likely to finish outside the top eight and ended in fourth, with the other two Saudi Arabian clubs claiming the top two spots. Al Hilal, who signed Benzema, won their first six games and dropped just two points in eight games, the four-time champions confirming their position as tournament favourites. Al Ahli, who lifted the trophy for the first time last May, also strolled through.

Perhaps the most impressive performers in the west were Tractor, the Iranian team who won their first domestic title in 2025. On their return to Asian competitions, they started with a couple of draws but then four straight wins and with just four goals conceded in total, they went through with some ease. Given the unrest in Iran and their lack

> There is no doubt that Saudi clubs are the favourites to lift the trophy and it is also likely that their biggest challenge will come from Japan

Table toppers... Al Hilal were the only unbeaten team in either league

THE STANDINGS

WEST REGION

	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Al Hilal	8	7	1	0	+11	22
2	Al Ahli	8	5	2	1	+12	17
3	Tractor	8	5	2	1	+8	17
4	Al Ittihad	8	5	0	3	+13	15
5	Al Wahda	8	4	2	2	+4	14
6	Shabab Al Ahli	8	3	2	3	0	11
7	Al Duhail	8	2	2	4	0	8
8	Al Sadd	8	2	2	4	-4	8
9	Sharjah	8	2	2	4	-8	8
10	Al Gharafa	8	2	0	6	-14	6
11	Al Shorta	8	1	2	5	-14	5
12	Nasaf	8	1	1	6	-8	4

EAST REGION

	Team	P	W	D	L	GD	Pts
1	Machida Zelvia	8	5	2	1	+8	17
2	Vissel Kobe	8	5	1	2	+7	16
3	Sanfrecce Hiroshima	8	4	3	1	+4	15
4	Buriram United	8	4	2	2	+2	14
5	Melbourne City	8	4	2	2	+2	14
6	Johor Darul Ta'zim	8	3	2	3	+1	11
7	FC Seoul	8	2	4	2	+1	10
8	Gangwon FC	8	2	3	3	-2	9
9	Ulsan HD	8	2	3	3	-2	9
10	Chengdu Rongcheng	8	1	3	4	-4	6
11	Shanghai Shenhua	8	1	1	6	-8	4
12	Shanghai Port	8	0	4	4	-9	4

of resources compared to some of the other clubs, it was a fine achievement.

While Saudi Arabia and Iran supplied the top four, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar contributed the next quartet. The latter had two teams just squeeze into the top eight with Al Duhail and Al Sadd getting just one point per game but going through on goal difference. Abu Dhabi club Al Wahda did better, finishing fifth, just a point behind Al Ittihad, while Shabab Al Ahli of Dubai took sixth.

There is no doubt that Saudi clubs are the favourites to lift the trophy and it is also likely that their biggest challenge will come from Japan. J. League clubs were even more dominant in the east, finishing first, second and third.

The most impressive performers were Machida Zelvia, who finished top in their first-ever appearance in continental competition. It was a very solid debut from the club just to the west of Tokyo. Their style, more direct than usual in the technical-minded Japan, was as tough for Asian opponents to deal with as those back home. Vissel Kobe and Sanfrecce Hiroshima have greater continental pedigree, though neither have lifted the trophy, and also made it through without breaking much sweat.

South Korean clubs still have the best overall record in terms of Asian titles won but the last triumph came back in 2020. This time around, the country was relieved to have two of their three go through, even if it was not exactly comfortable. Jesse Lingard helped FC Seoul for a while before leaving in December at the end of the K-League season, but the capital club had enough to take seventh, while a final-day draw gave Gangwon FC eighth spot.

It could, would, have been worse had the Chinese clubs got their act together. Yet the three teams from the Middle Kingdom propped up the rest in tenth, 11th and 12th. Shanghai Port have been domestic champions for the last three years but under Kevin Muscat have yet to impress in Asia. This time, they scored just twice in eight games, a truly terrible return for the dominant team in a major Asian league. Port didn't win at all and came bottom. Shanghai Shenhua, city rivals and second domestically last year, didn't perform much better, losing six of their eight. Chengdu Rongcheng managed six points but it was still not enough.

Those poor performances have proven costly. From next season, only one Chinese team will qualify directly for the league phase, after Thailand usurped them in the AFC's coefficient rankings.

For that, Thai clubs can thank their champions Buriram United who, along with Johor Darul Ta'zim of Malaysia, made it through to the knockout rounds once again. The challenge for these two Southeast Asian powerhouses is to turn these regular appearances in the knockout stage into genuine challenges for the big prize. As yet, they have not managed to do so.

There was good news for Australian supporters who have been starved of Champions League success since Western Sydney Wanderers won it in 2014. Melbourne City took fifth place, going through with a game to spare, and became just the second team from Down Under to advance to the last 16 in the past decade.

Big boost...Buriram United's consistent AFC CL performances mean Thailand have overtaken China in the coefficient rankings

Canada

JOHN MOLINARO

World Cup presents golden opportunity for CPL

2026 season could be a crucial one in the short history of the Canadian top flight

More than a few critics voiced their doubts over the long-term viability of the Canadian Premier League when its inaugural season kicked off in the spring of 2019. Yet, fast forward to 2026, and the CPL is still going strong as it prepares to kick off its eighth campaign in early April, with reigning champions Atletico Ottawa looking to hoist the North Star Cup for a second consecutive year.

While the CPL has shown it has staying power, it's still looking to make more inroads in establishing itself as an important part of the Canadian sports landscape. Ice hockey remains the king of all sports in the Great White North and tends to garner the overwhelming majority of the media attention, leaving the CPL, and to a larger extent soccer, out in the cold.

That will change this summer when Canada co-hosts the FIFA World Cup alongside the United States and Mexico, especially as Canada will play their group-stage games in Toronto and Vancouver. The national media's collective gaze will be firmly focused on the World Cup when it touches down on Canadian soil, and the CPL is hoping it will reap the benefits of this unprecedented interest in the sport by attracting new fans to matches played in its eight stadiums across the country.

The newcomers on the block this season are FC Supra, the CPL's first team in Quebec, Canada's second-most populous province. The club's name, logo and colours pay homage to the Montreal Supra, who played in the old Canadian Soccer League from 1988 to 1992. FC Supra have also committed to building their roster entirely of Quebecois players, drawing inspiration from La Liga outfit Athletic Club and their *Cantera* policy, where only players with Basque roots are selected.

This season also features the rebranded Inter Toronto FC, who were part of the CPL's first season as York9 FC before changing names to York United in 2021. The team will still play its home games at York Lions Stadium on the campus of York University just outside of Toronto. But Inter Toronto's Mexican owners are looking to upgrade and refurbish Lamport Stadium with an eye towards eventually moving the team into the 50-year-old venue located in Toronto's trendy Liberty Village neighbourhood.

Rebrand...York United have now become Inter Toronto ahead of the upcoming 2026 campaign

Atletico Ottawa have some work to do in order to repeat their CPL title win of last campaign following a mass exodus of key players during the off-season. Forward Sam Salter, last year's league MVP and Golden Boot winner, was sold to Swedish club GAIS. Following him out the door were veteran centre-back Amer Didic and goalkeeper Nathan Ingham, both to Calgary-based outfit Cavalry FC, along with influential attacking midfielder and scorer of the famous "icicle kick" goal that sealed last season's title win David Rodriguez, who returned to Mexican club Atletico San Luis at the conclusion of his loan.

The CPL is also riding high after three players, Noah Abatneh (Atletico Ottawa), Shola Jimoh (Inter Toronto) and Tiago Coimbra (then HFX Wanderers but now IFK Goteborg), received their first international call-ups. The 1-0 win over Guatemala fell outside an official FIFA window and was later classified as a B-team match, so doesn't count as an official cap, but all three put in decent showings, demonstrating that the league can serve as a developmental pathway for aspiring national team players.

World Cup opportunities... Tiago Coimbra was one of three CPL players to play for Canada B in January

Canadian Premier League champions ...Atletico Ottawa winger Ballou Tabla

That being said, there are still big challenges ahead – mostly off the pitch, but also on it. This season the league will carry the status of guinea pig as it provides the testing ground for a proposed change to the laws of football. The so-called "daylight rule", suggested by Arsene Wenger, will require there to be a complete gap between the forward and the last defender for offside to be called, and the CPL has been chosen to test the idea out from the start of the 2026 season.

That, however, is only a minor issue compared with the long-term future of the league's clubs. Last November, Valour FC announced that it would fold. The league had been covering the Winnipeg club's operating costs since 2024, and it becomes the second CPL team to cease operations after FC Edmonton shut down following the 2022 season.

Elsewhere, the owners of Pacific FC, SixFive Sports & Entertainment still haven't been able to find a buyer after putting the club up for sale in September. The club's ownership group has been involved in a very public feud with the city of Langford over Pacific's use of its training centre, as well as claims of unpaid stadium rental fees and game-related costs.

The Canadian Premier League is hoping that it will reap the benefits of this unprecedented interest in football

These are all just the latest in a series of embarrassing own goals scored in recent years; missteps that have made it more difficult for the league to earn the type of credibility in the eyes of Canadian sports fans and the media it has badly sought for so long.

Sudan

ALASDAIR HOWORTH

Football returns to Sudan

Amid civil strife, the Sudan Premier League finally restarts but the two biggest clubs' nomadic existence continues

Al Merrikh Stadium...the club returned to Omdurman at the start of the year

Al Hilal and Al Merrikh, the two biggest clubs in Sudanese football, are taking their 90-year rivalry to another level this season as they compete to win not only the Sudan Premier League but also the Rwanda Premier League.

The two sides from Omdurman have become the first teams in modern football history to compete simultaneously in two different national leagues. And, with the clubs occupying both the top two positions in Rwanda and into the second league phase in Sudan, they are competing to become the first-ever club to simultaneously win two national league titles.

The unique position of the two clubs is owed to the return of football to Sudan in January this year. After nearly three years of no football in the country because of the ongoing conflict that the United Nations has described as "the worst humanitarian crisis on Earth," football has finally returned to Sudan.

Those three years have forced both clubs into a nomadic existence. Over the first nine months after the outbreak of war, Al Hilal and Al Merrikh played "home" games in Rwanda, Tanzania and Morocco, while the national

team, based in Saudi Arabia, would play at "home" in Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and later in South Sudan.

In the 2023-24 season the clubs were unable to find any home to play league football, despite continuing to play in the African Champions League.

Last season the clubs found a new home, more than 5,000 kilometres from Sudan, on the Atlantic coast of Africa. The two rivals joined the Mauritanian Super D1 to finally give themselves a more permanent home, for a season at least.

That stability brought success. Al Hilal romped to first place ahead of Al Merrikh and serial Mauritanian champions FC Nouadhibou, leading them to join a very prestigious group of clubs to have finished top of a foreign nation's league. In addition, Al Hilal also reached the quarter-finals of the Champions League for the first time in a decade.

But, as guest teams, Al Hilal and Al Merrikh could not qualify for the CAF Champions League off the back of their performances in Mauritania. So last season the Sudanese FA organised a mini-league in July, which was played in Ad Damar, 300 kilometres down the Nile from Khartoum. Both Omdurman sides topped the league and re-qualified for the Champions League.

With no established domestic league in sight last summer, Al Hilal and Al Merrikh had to find a new home for competitive action once again, this time somewhat closer to home in Rwanda. But a spanner was thrown into the works when the Sudanese FA announced that they would be restarting the national league in January and if Al Hilal and Al Merrikh didn't participate in the whole competition, they wouldn't be able to qualify for continental football.

Champions League... Al Hilal have reached the knockout rounds in each of the last two campaigns

Both clubs decided to send second-string sides back to Sudan and leave their first teams in Kigali. And so on January 8, Al Merrikh played their first full league game back in Sudan against Al Saham Ad Damer. Meanwhile, 15 minutes earlier, they had also kicked off a Rwanda Premier League match against Police FC, thus becoming the first club in the history of world football to play two league matches in two national leagues simultaneously.

> After nearly three years of "the worst humanitarian crisis on Earth," football has finally returned to Sudan

With the conflict ongoing and travel inadvisable, the league in Sudan was split into four groups played in six different government-controlled cities. The clubs from Khartoum were split across the various leagues as the city was not deemed safe enough to host games at the start of the season.

But with the group phase concluded in February, the league took a break for Ramadan and will start the final eight-team league phase at the end of April in Khartoum. Almost three years to the day of the war breaking out in Khartoum, football will finally return to Sudan's capital.

Rather than splitting their squads into a first and second team as they have done in the first half of the season, both clubs are expected to mix those teams and leave squads of relatively equal strength in both Rwanda and Sudan in order to compete on both fronts.

Hopefully this will be the last time that either club will have to leave the country in exile. But if either wins the title in Rwanda, claiming two foreign leagues in two years would not be a bad haul for the giants of Omdurman, a small ray of light and hope amid the suffering of the nation.

Training session...Al Merrikh players during last year's mini-league

Oceania

STEVE MENARY

Key signing...Daniel Bunch (#16) celebrates with his Tupapa Maraerenga team-mates
Credit: OFC Media via Phototek

Cook Islands' champions sail into OFC Champions League

Tupapa Maraerenga come out on top in preliminary qualification tournament hosted in Samoa

Cook Islands' champions Tupapa Maraerenga are looking for a new coach ahead of the club's fourth appearance in the group stage of the Oceania Football Confederation's Champions League.

Tupapa sailed through the 2026 edition's qualifying stages in January and February, dropping just two points and conceding a single goal in three games under their former striker Paavo Mustonen.

"At this moment we have not decided on who will be leading the club as coach just yet," Tupapa chairman Grover Harmon, who was at the heart of Tupapa's defence in Apia, Samoa as captain, told *World Soccer*. "Our plans for the group stage are to get out of the qualifying stage and to make history. To do that we will need our strongest team, even if it means looking for a few extra players overseas."

Tupapa brought in six overseas stars, who played in all three qualifiers. "We managed to get a few players in," added Harmon. "Twelve players were from the club, and six players were from overseas. We had four non-Cook Islanders in the team which helped strengthen the side."

Party time...Tupapa players celebrate their qualification
Credit: OFC Media via Phototek

English striker Daniel Bunch usually plays in New Zealand for Fencibles, but turned out for Tupapa here. He scored twice in the opening 3-0 victory over Tonga's Nukuhetulu, who had also brought in four overseas players.

Bunch was joined in Tupapa's starting XI by club team-mate Jordan Boon, who started his career in England at Bolton Wanderers.

Tupapa also turned to New Zealand to recruit midfielders Joshua Galletly, who plays for Melville United, and Aadil Kamaldeen, along with New Zealand-based Cook Islands junior internationals: Dallas Rongokea, a striker from Marist, and goalkeeper Emmett Connolly from Western Springs.

The second game against home side Vaivase-Tai proved a closer affair with a second-half goal from Jefferson Fa'amatau securing a point for the Samoan champions, whose side was drawn from local players.

Before the final matchday, all four sides theoretically had a chance of qualification although Nukuhetulu would have needed a big win over Vaivase-Tai to restore their goal difference.

In the final game against American Samoa's Pago Youth, Tupapa sealed qualification with two first-half strikes from Bunch – including a penalty – and a late goal from Harmon, who was has won eight domestic titles since taking over as president nine years ago. Harmon also took over as president of the Cook Islands Football Association in August 2024.

The OFC Champions League has partly been overshadowed by the launch of Oceania's first professional league in January.

Central midfielder Ken Kerewi was one of three overseas players used by Pago Youth in Samoa. He says: "The OFC Pro League is huge ...but it's having an impact on the Champions League in area of media awareness.

"It's hard for us to get match highlights of the current Champions League qualifying matches but we see highlight uploads of the OFC Pro League matches, so it gives me the insight that the OFC Pro League is more prioritised than the Champions League qualifiers."

While the Pro League winners get a place at FIFA's Club World Cup, the OFC Champions League winners get prize money of NZD$75,000 with NZD$50,000 for the runners-up. The losing semi-finalists get NZD$25,000 apiece, which is the prize Harmon is eyeing up when the group stage starts in August.

THE STANDINGS

	Team	P	W	D	L	Pts
1	Tupapa Maraerenga	3	2	1	0	7
2	Vaivase-Tai	3	1	2	0	5
3	Pago Youth	3	0	2	1	2
4	Nukuhetulu	3	0	1	2	1

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ON SALE APRIL 17

Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

King of the Amazon Derby...the rainforest rivalry is the most frequently played fixture in the world
Credit: Alamy

THE KING OF THE AMAZON DERBY

The most-played fixture in world football has taken place almost 800 times, yet most fans outside of Brazil have probably never heard of it. Known as the Re-Pa Derby, or the King of the Amazon Derby, the clash is contested by Remo and Paysandu, whose stadiums sit just 200 metres apart in the northern city of Belem. They have faced each other 781 times – an average of more than seven times a year for over a century – far surpassing Europe's most frequent rivalry, the Old Firm clash between Glasgow clubs Celtic and Rangers (451 meetings).

The frequency of the fixture stems largely from the absence of a nationwide league in Brazil until 1971, which gave state championships a special significance. Since they first met in 1914, Para's championship has been completely dominated by Remo and Paysandu, who have won 98 titles between them. They have also faced off in the state cup and even in regional competitions in neighbouring Suriname.

But meetings may become less frequent this year: last season Remo won promotion to the top-flight Serie A for the first time since 1994, while Paysandu were relegated to Serie C.

EL SALVADOR'S RIVALRY THAT DIVIDES A FAMILY

Family members facing each other in football is nothing new, but El Salvador boasts a rivalry with a unique distinction. The Argentine duo of Ernesto and Daniel Corti are currently the only father and son in world football serving as head coaches of different clubs in the same top-flight league.

In the most recent meeting between the two on February 8, Ernesto's Alianza run out 4-1 victors against Daniel's Hercules – a result made even more painful by the fact it came on Corti Junior's 43rd birthday.

It was not the first time that Daniel has suffered at his father's hands as a coach. He previously managed fellow Salvadoran club Fuerte San Francisco until September 2025, when a 1-0 defeat to Alianza cost him his job. Earlier that year, he had been in charge of another top-flight side, Cacahuatique, only to depart following a 4-0 loss – once again inflicted by Ernesto's team. Daniel, however, relishes the matches against his father, though the same cannot be said of his mother Graciela, who does not know whose goals to celebrate.

RELEGATION CONTROVERSY IN THE MALDIVES

The Dhivehi Premier League, the Maldives' top flight, has been hit by scandal after a club escaped relegation by not playing their final match of the season. Green Streets entered their last game needing only to avoid a defeat of four goals or more against New Radiant. But they failed to fulfil the fixture and were handed a 2-0 loss – a result that controversially kept them up and relegated rivals Club Valencia.

The Football Association of the Maldives (FAM) responded by imposing a transfer ban on Green Streets and fining the club 50,000 Maldivian rufiyaa (£2,380). Yet the FAM allowed the result to stand, prompting a furious Club Valencia statement to accuse the governing body of favouritism. The club also suggested it would escalate the matter further to FIFA and the Asian Football Confederation.

Green Streets, meanwhile, categorically denied any foul play, instead blaming a flu and diarrhoea outbreak within the squad: "Unfortunately, a significant number of our registered players were affected, which directly impacted squad availability on matchday. At no point did Green Streets act with intent to forfeit or manipulate the outcome of the match."

The Sweeper

COMING UP...

Hegelmann v FK TransINVEST
Lithuanian TOPLYGA, April 4
A unique fixture returns to Lithuania's top flight following a one-year absence as Hegelmann and promoted TransINVEST – both founded by logistics companies – face off in a match billed locally as "The Driver Derby" and internationally as "*El Logistico*".

Pacific FC v FC Supra du Quebec
Canadian Premier League, April 11
FC Supra du Quebec, the first Canadian Premier League club from the country's predominantly French-speaking region, will make their competition debut away to Pacific FC. Their trip to Vancouver Island will also be their longest journey of the season, at almost 4,000 kilometres.

Hashtag United v Hashtag United II
BBC Essex Women's Cup, April 16
Clubs rarely face their own reserves in cup ties, especially finals. Yet that fate awaits Hashtag United, the club founded by YouTuber Spencer Owen that now plays in the English football pyramid, after both their women's first team and reserves reached the BBC Essex Women's Cup final.

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Club Football

EUROPE

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Feb 17 – Monaco
Monaco (Fra) 2 (Balogun 1, 18)
PSG (Fra) 3 (Doue 29, 67, Hakimi 41)

Feb 17 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 5 (Sara 15, Lang 49, 75, Sanchez 60, Boey 86)
Juventus (Ita) 2 (Koopmeiners 16, 32)

Feb 17 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 0
Real Madrid (Spa) 1 (Vinicius Jr 50)

Feb 17 – Dortmund
B. Dortmund (Ger) 2 (Guirassy 3, Beier 42)
Atalanta (Ita) 0

Feb 18 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 1 (Cafarguliyev 54)
Newcastle United (Eng) 6 (Gordon 3, 32 pen, 33, 45+1 pen, Thiaw 8, Murphy 72)

Feb 18 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 3 (Onyedika 52, Tresoldi 60, Tzolis 89)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 3 (Alvarez 8 pen, Lookman 45+4, Ordonez 79 og)

Feb 18 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 3 (Fet 20, Hauge 61, Hogh 64)
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Esposito 20)

Feb 18 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 0
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Schick 60, 63)

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Feb 24 – Newcastle
Newcastle United (Eng) 3 (Tonali 4, Joelinton 6, Botman 52)
Qarabag (Aze) 2 (Duran 51, Cafarguliyev 57)
Newcastle United win 9-3 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 4 (Sorloth 23, 76, 87, Cardoso 48)
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (Ordonez 36)
Atletico Madrid win 7-4 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Bastoni 76)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 2 (Hauge 58, Evjen 72)
Bodo/Glimt win 5-2 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 0
Olympiacos (Gre) 0
Bayer Leverkusen win 2-0 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Paris
PSG (Fra) 2 (Marquinhos 60, Kvaratskhelia 66)
Monaco (Fra) 2 (Akliouche 45, Teze 90+1)
PSG win 5-4 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 3 (Locatelli 37 pen, Gatti 70, McKennie 82)
Galatasaray (Tur) 2 (Osimhen 105+1, Yilmaz 119)
AET; Galatasaray win 7-5 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Tchoameni 16, Vinicius Jr 80)
Benfica (Por) 1 (Rafa Silva 14)
Real Madrid win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 4 (Scamacca 5, Zappacosta 45, Pasalic 57, Samardzic 90+8 pen)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 (Adeyemi 75)
Atalanta win 4-3 on aggregate

Round of 16 Draw

PSG (Fra) v Chelsea (Eng); Galatasaray (Tur) v Liverpool (Eng); Real Madrid (Spa) v Manchester City (Eng); Atalanta (Ita) v Bayern Munich (Ger); Newcastle United (Eng) v Barcelona (Spa); Atletico Madrid (Spa) v Tottenham Hotspur (Eng); Bodo/Glimt (Nor) v Sporting (Por); Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) v Arsenal (Eng)

- *First legs took place March 10-11;*
- *Second legs took place March 17-18*

2025-26 EUROPA LEAGUE

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Feb 19 – Razgrad
Ludogorets (Bul) 2 (Duah 24, Son 67)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 1 (Yusuf 27)

Feb 19 – Athens
Panathinaikos (Gre) 2 (Tetteh 31, 61)
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 2 (Visinsky 11, Ladra 80)

Feb 19 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 1 (Beljo 44)
Genk (Bel) 3 (Heynen 15, El Ouahdi 21, 90)

Feb 19 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 1 (Jeremejeff 77)
Celta Vigo (Spa) 2 (Aspas 34, Swedberg 43)

Feb 19 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 1 (Nygren 21)
Stuttgart (Ger) 4 (El Khannouss 15, 28, Leweling 57, Tomas 90+3)

Feb 19 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 0
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 3 (Murillo 21, Igor Jesus 43, Gibbs-White 50)

Feb 19 – Bergen
Brann (Nor) 0
Bologna (Ita) 1 (Castro 9)

Feb 19 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 0
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Tebo Uchenna 45+1)

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Feb 26 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 2 (Kanichowsky 14, Zachariassen 30)
Ludogorets (Bul) 0
Ferencvaros win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 1 (Spacil 62)
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Tetteh 9)
AET; 3-3 on aggregate;
Panathinaikos win 4-3 on pens

Feb 26 – Genk
Genk (Bel) 3 (Sor 51, Perez Vinlof 101 og, Heymans 114)
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 3 (Bakrar 45+2, Stojkovic 57 pen, 75)
AET; Genk win 6-4 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Vigo
Celta Vigo (Spa) 1 (Swedberg 63)
PAOK (Gre) 0
Celta Vigo win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 0
Celtic (Sco) 1 (McCowan 1)
Stuttgart win 4-2 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Nottingham
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 1 (Hudson-Odoi 68)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 2 (Akturkoglu 22, 48 pen)
Nottingham Forest win 4-2 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Bologna
Bologna (Ita) 1 (Joao Mario 56)
Brann (Nor) 0
Bologna win 2-0 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 0
Lille (Fra) 2 (Giroud 4, Ngoy 99)
AET; Lille win 2-1 on aggregate

Round of 16 Draw

Ferencvaros (Hun) v Braga (Por); Panathinaikos (Gre) v Real Betis (Spa); Genk (Bel) v Freiburg (Ger); Celta Vigo (Spa) v Lyon (Fra); Stuttgart (Ger) v Porto (Por); Nottingham Forest (Eng) v Midtjylland (Den); Bologna (Ita) v Roma (Ita); Lille (Fra) v Aston Villa (Eng)

- *First legs took place March 12;*
- *Second legs took place March 19*

2025-26 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 1st Leg

Feb 19 – Tampere
KuPS (Fin) 0
Lech Poznan (Pol) 2 (Kozubal 9, Ismaheel 41)

Feb 19 – Yerevan
Noah (Arm) 1 (Hambardzumyan 53)
AZ (Ned) 0

Feb 19 – Mostar
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 1 (Abramovic 55)
Crystal Palace (Eng) 1 (Sarr 43)

Feb 19 – Bialystok
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 0
Fiorentina (Ita) 3 (Ranieri 53, Mandragora 65, Piccoli 81 pen)

Feb 19 – Skopje
Shkendija (Mak) 0
Samsunspor (Tur) 1 (Mouandilmadji 77)

Feb 19 – Pristina
Drita (Kos) 2 (Bl. Krasniqi 59, Balaj 75)
Celje (Svn) 3 (Kucys 19, Avdyli 41, Poplatnik 90+4)

Feb 19 – Olomouc
Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 1 (Sturm 58)
Lausanne-Sport (Swi) 1 (Butler-Oyedeji 22)

Feb 19 – Nicosia
Omonia (Cyp) 0
Rijeka (Cro) 1 (Adu-Adjei 86)

Knockout Round Play-Offs – 2nd Leg

Feb 26 – Poznan
Lech Poznan (Pol) 1 (Rodriguez 65)
KuPS (Fin) 0
Lech Poznan win 3-0 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 4 (Daal 5, Mijnans 39, 54, Jensen 90+1)
Noah (Arm) 0
AZ win 4-1 on aggregate

Feb 26 – London
Crystal Palace (Eng) 2 (Lacroix 36, Guessand 90+3)
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 0
Crystal Palace win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Fagioli 107, Romanczuk 114 og)
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 4 (Mazurek 23, 45+3, 49, Imaz 118)
AET; Fiorentina win 5-4 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Samsun
Samsunspor (Tur) 4 (Ntcham 53 pen, Ndiaye 71, Mouandilmadji 79, 90+2)
Shkendija (Mak) 0
Samsunspor win 5-0 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 3 (Seslar 19, 43 pen, Hrka 23)
Drita (Kos) 2 (Bl. Krasniqi 26, Dabiqaj 51)
Celje win 6-4 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Lausanne
Lausanne-Sport (Swi) 1 (Janneh 35)
Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 2 (Sip 22, Rusek 44)
Sigma Olomouc win 3-2 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Rijeka
Rijeka (Cro) 3 (Fruk 52, 67, Adu-Adjei 79)
Omonia (Cyp) 1 (Tankovic 13)
Rijeka win 4-1 on aggregate

Round of 16 Draw

Lech Poznan (Pol) v Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr); AZ (Ned) v Sparta Prague (Cze); Crystal Palace (Eng) v AEK Larnaca (Cyp); Fiorentina (Ita) v Rakow Czestochowa (Pol); Samsunspor (Tur) v Rayo Vallecano (Spa); Celje (Svn) v AEK Athens (Gre); Sigma Olomouc (Cze) v Mainz (Ger); Rijeka (Cro) v Strasbourg (Fra)

- *First legs took place March 12;*
- *Second legs took place March 19*

SOUTH AMERICA

2026 COPA LIBERTADORES

Qualifying First Stage – 1st leg

Feb 3 – La Paz
The Strongest (Bol) 2 (Arrascaita 56 pen, Abrego 82 pen)
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 1 (Calzadilla 63)

Feb 4 – Pedro Juan Caballero
2 de Mayo (Par) 1 (Acosta 84)
Alianza Lima (Per) 0

Feb 5 – Montevideo
Juventud (Uru) 0
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 1 (Chancellor 47)

Qualifying First Stage – 2nd leg

Feb 10 – San Cristobal
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 1 (Pollero 32)
The Strongest (Bol) 0
2-2 on aggregate; Tachira win 5-3 on pens

Feb 11 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 1 (Advincula 63)
2 de Mayo (Par) 1 (Ayala 74 pen)
2 de Mayo win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 12 – Quito
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 3 (Fajardo 6, 75, Chancellor 64)
Juventud (Uru) 4 (Sanchez 25, Barrandeguy 45+2 pen, Lago 49 pen, Pernicone 90+2)
4-4 on aggregate; Juventud win 4-3 on pens

Qualifying Second Stage – 1st Leg

Feb 17 – Pedro Juan Caballero
2 de Mayo (Par) 2 (Caceres 83, Cristiano 84 og)
Sporting Cristal (Per) 2 (Yotun 62 pen, Martinez 87 og)

Feb 17 – Valencia
Carabobo (Ven) 1 (Tortolero 35)
Huachipato (Chi) 0

Feb 17 – Montevideo
Liverpool (Uru) 1 (Strasorier 64)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 2 (Fydriszewski 52, H. Palacios 90+2)

Feb 18 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 0
Argentinos Juniors (Arg) 1 (Porcel 90+1)

Feb 18 – Potosi
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 1 (Baldomar 47)
Botafogo (Bra) 0

Feb 18 – Rancagua
O'Higgins (Chi) 1 (Gonzalez 4)
Bahia (Bra) 0

Feb 19 – Montevideo
Juventud (Uru) 0
Guarani (Par) 0

Feb 19 – San Cristobal
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 0
Tolima (Col) 1 (Florez 65)

Qualifying Second Stage – 2nd Leg

Feb 24 – Callao
Sporting Cristal (Per) 0
2 de Mayo (Par) 0
2-2 on aggregate; Sporting Cristal win 5-4 on pens

Feb 24 – Talcahuano
Huachipato (Chi) 1 (Martinez 87)
Carabobo (Ven) 2 (Ramirez 29, Tortolero 42)
Carabobo win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 0
Liverpool (Uru) 0
Independiente Medellin win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Buenos Aires
Argentinos Juniors (Arg) 0
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 1 (Quinonez 66)
1-1 on aggregate; Barcelona SC win 5-4 on pens

Feb 25 – Rio de Janeiro
Botafogo (Bra) 2 (Alex Telles 5, Danilo 45+6)
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 0
Botafogo win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Salvador
Bahia (Bra) 2 (Willian Jose 1, 45+1)
O'Higgins (Chi) 1 (Castillo 54)
2-2 on aggregate; O'Higgins win 4-3 on pens

Feb 26 – Asuncion
Guarani (Par) 1 (Servio 56 pen)
Juventud (Uru) 2 (Barrandeguy 50, Peralta 90+4)
Juventud win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 26 – Ibague
Tolima (Col) 0
Dep Tachira (Ven) 1 (L. Gonzalez 90+4 pen)
1-1 on aggregate; Tolima win 3-0 on pens

Qualifying Third Stage Draw

Juventud (Uru) v Ind Medellin (Col); O'Higgins (Chi) v Tolima (Col); Carabobo (Ven) v Sporting Cristal (Per); Barcelona SC (Ecu) v Botafogo (Bra)

- *First legs took place March 3-5;*
- *Second legs took place March 10-12*

2026 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Qualifying First Stage

Mar 3 – Sucre
Independiente Petrolero (Bol) 0
Guabira (Bol) 0
Independiente Petrolero win 3-2 on pens

Mar 3 – Calama
Cobresal (Chi) 1 (Pino 85)
Audax Italiano (Chi) 1 (Matus 45+1)
Audax Italiano win 3-2 on pens

Mar 3 – Trujillo
Alianza Atletico (Per) 2 (Flores 22, Coronel 90+8)
Deportivo Garcilaso (Per) 0

Mar 3 – Montevideo
Montevideo City Torque (Uru) 1 (Romero 47)
Defensor Sporting (Uru) 0

Mar 3 – Valencia
Academia Puerto Cabello (Ven) 0
Monagas (Ven) 0
Academia Puerto Cabello win 3-2 on pens

Mar 4 – Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Blooming (Bol) 3 (Garces 65, Vasquez 83, Hinojosa 86)
San Antonio Bulo Bulo (Bol) 0

Mar 4 – Santiago
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 1 (Guerrero 90+4)
Palestino (Chi) 2 (Da Silva 85, Garguez 90+6)

Mar 4 – Medellin
Atletico Nacional (Col) 1 (Rodriguez 28)
Millonarios (Col) 3 (Contreras 21, 75, L. Castro 42 pen)

Mar 4 – Cuenca
Deportivo Cuenca (Ecu) 3 (Diaz 22, Mosquera 67, Leguizamon 90+4)
Libertad (Ecu) 0

Mar 4 – Asuncion
Sportivo Trinidense (Par) 0
Olimpia (Par) 1 (Lezcano 35)

Mar 4 – Caracas
Caracas (Ven) 0
Metropolitanos (Ven) 0
Caracas win 4-3 on pens

Mar 5 – Cali
America de Cali (Col) 2 (Guzman 45+3 pen, Palacios 55)
Atletico Bucaramanga (Col) 1 (Sambueza 23)

Mar 5 – Machala
Orense (Ecu) 0
Macara (Ecu) 1 (Blanc 68)

Mar 5 – Asuncion
Nacional (Par) 1 (Valdez 85)
Recoleta (Par) 1 (Parzajuk 45+4)
Recoleta win 5-4 on pens

Mar 5 – Cusco
Cienciano (Per) 1 (Becerra 51)
Melgar (Per) 1 (Ramos 72)
Cienciano win 5-4 on pens

Mar 5 – Montevideo
Boston River (Uru) 1 (Martinez 81)
Racing (Uru) 0

2026 RECOPA SUDAMERICANA

Feb 19 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 1 (Castillo 77)
Flamengo (Bra) 0

Feb 26 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (De Arrascaeta 37 pen, Jorginho 85 pen)
Lanus (Arg) 3 (Castillo 29, Canale 118, Aquino 120+2)
AET; Lanus win 4-2 on aggregate

CONCACAF

2026 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS CUP

First Round – 1st Leg

Feb 3 – San Diego
San Diego FC (USA) 4 (Duah 68, Vazquez 76, Mighten 81, Bombino 86)
Pumas UNAM (Mex) 1 (Morales 11)

Feb 3 – Tegucigalpa
Olimpia (Hon) 1 (Alvarez 50)
America (Mex) 2 (Davila 45+2, Juarez 88)

Feb 3 – Hamilton
Forge FC (Can) 0
Tigres UANL (Mex) 0

Feb 4 – Langley
Vancouver FC (Can) 0
Cruz Azul (Mex) 3 (Paradela 22, Morales 44, Palavecino 65)

Feb 4 – Guatemala City
Xelaju (Gua) 1 (Escobar 83)
Monterrey (Mex) 1 (Corona 90+1)

Feb 17 – Hamilton
Atletico Ottawa (Can) 0
Nashville SC (USA) 2 (Pacius 66, Surridge 90+5)

Feb 17 – San Pedro Sula
Real Espana (Hon) 1 (Jean-Baptiste 51)
LAFC (USA) 6 (Bouanga 3 pen, 24, 71, Martinez 11, Son Heung-min 22 pen, Tillman 39)

Feb 18 – Port of Spain
Defence Force (Tri) 0
Philadelphia Union (USA) 5 (Iloski 29, Alladoh 32, Makhanya 64, Damiani 69, 81 pen)

Feb 18 – Cartago
Cartagines (Crc) 0
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 0

Feb 18 – Santiago de los Caballeros
O&M (Dom) 0
FC Cincinnati (USA) 4 (Barlow 12, Denkey 33, Jabbari 86, 90+2)

Feb 19 – Penonome
Sporting San Miguelito (Pan) 1 (Tello 37)
LA Galaxy (USA) 1 (Paintsil 68)

First Round – 2nd Leg

Feb 10 – Mexico City
Pumas UNAM (Mex) 1 (Vite 47)
San Diego FC (USA) 0
San Diego FC win 4-2 on aggregate

Feb 10 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 4 (Aguirre 22, 71, Correa 81, Joaquim 86)
Forge FC (Can) 1 (Wright 80 pen)
Tigres UANL win 4-1 on aggregate

Feb 11 – Monterrey
Monterrey (Mex) 2 (Fimbres 33, Ocampos 83 pen)
Xelaju (Gua) 0
Monterrey win 3-1 on aggregate

Feb 11 – Mexico City
America (Mex) 0
Olimpia (Hon) 0
America win 2-1 on aggregate

Feb 12 – Puebla
Cruz Azul (Mex) 5 (Romero 37, 45+1, 62, Rodarte 68, Ibanez 74)
Vancouver FC (Can) 0
Cruz Azul win 8-0 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Los Angeles
LAFC (USA) 1 (Tafari 64)
Real Espana (Hon) 0
LAFC win 7-1 on aggregate

Feb 24 – Nashville
Nashville SC (USA) 5 (Muyl 21, Knight 36, Pacius 55, Maher 63, Qasem 83)
Atletico Ottawa (Can) 0
Nashville SC win 7-0 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati (USA) 9 (Mboma Dem 18, 58, Valenzuela 27, Castillo 33 og, Barlow 35, Chavez 48, Jimenez 68, Powell 78, Chirila 86)
O&M (Dom) 0
FC Cincinnati win 13-0 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Vancouver
Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) 2 (Cabrera 58, Berhalter 80)
Cartagines (Crc) 0
Vancouver Whitecaps win 2-0 on aggregate

Feb 25 – Carson
LA Galaxy (USA) 0
Sporting San Miguelito (Pan) 0
1-1 on aggregate; LA Galaxy win on away goals

Feb 26 – Philadelphia
Philadelphia Union (USA) 7 (Martinez 7, Lukic 10 pen, Korzeniowski 12, 48, Bender 53, Sullivan 76, 88)
Defence Force (Tri) 0
Philadelphia Union win 12-0 on aggregate

Round of 16 Draw

San Diego FC (USA) v Toluca (Mex); LA Galaxy (USA) v Mount Pleasant (Jam); Cruz Azul (Mex) v Monterrey (Mex); LAFC (USA) v Alajuelense (Crc); Nashville SC (USA) v Inter Miami (USA); America (Mex) v Philadelphia Union (USA); Tigres UANL (Mex) v FC Cincinnati (USA); Vancouver Whitecaps (Can) v Seattle Sounders (USA)

- *First legs took place March 10-12;*
- *Second legs took place March 17-19*

HAITI

Regular Season Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Baltimore*	7	4	1	2	11	5	13
Ouanaminthe*	7	4	0	3	10	7	12
Racing Gonaives*	7	3	3	1	5	3	12
AS Capoise*	7	3	2	2	7	4	11
Real Hope	7	3	2	2	7	6	11
Cosmopolites	7	3	1	3	5	10	10
FICA	7	1	2	4	3	8	5
Tempete	7	0	3	4	4	9	3

*Advance to championship round

Regular Season Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Racing Club Haitien*	5	2	2	1	6	3	8
Cavaly*	5	2	2	1	5	3	8
Violette*	5	2	2	1	2	2	8
Juventus des Cayes*	5	2	1	2	4	5	7
Don Bosco	5	0	4	1	4	5	4
America des Cayes	5	0	3	2	3	6	3

*Advance to championship round

Championship Round Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Baltimore*	6	3	1	2	8	6	10
Racing Gonaives	6	2	2	2	5	5	8
AS Capoise	6	2	2	2	6	7	8
Ouanaminthe	6	2	1	3	3	4	7

*Advance to final

Championship Round Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Violette* (C)	6	4	2	0	8	1	14
Cavaly	6	2	3	1	8	5	9
Juventus des Cayes	6	0	4	2	4	7	4
Racing Club Haitien	6	0	3	3	5	12	3

*Advance to final

Final

Feb 8: Baltimore 0-0 Violette
Feb 14: Violette 2-1 Baltimore (agg 2-1)

AFRICA

2025-26 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Feb 7 – Ndola
Power Dynamos (Zam) 2 (Manyanga 47, Mumba 90+2)
RS Berkane (Mar) 0

Feb 8 – Uyo
Rivers United (Nga) 1 (Manyo 33)
Pyramids (Egy) 4 (Fathi 52, Ma. Hamdy 77 pen, Al Fakhouri 88, Maher 90+1)

Feb 14 – Berkane
RS Berkane (Mar) 3 (Mehri 38, Bassene 43, 53)
Rivers United (Nga) 0

Feb 14 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 3 (Ziko 17, Obama 33, Ewerton 59)
Power Dynamos (Zam) 1 (Mulambia 19)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pyramids (Q)	6	5	1	0	14	2	16
RS Berkane (Q)	6	3	1	2	8	6	10
Power Dynamos	6	2	1	3	4	7	7
Rivers United	6	0	1	5	2	13	1

Group B

Feb 7 – Tizi Ouzou
JS Kabylie (Alg) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 0

Feb 7 – Rabat
AS FAR (Mar) 1 (Bach 85)
Young Africans (Taz) 0

Feb 15 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 0
AS FAR (Mar) 0

Feb 15 – Zanzibar City
Young Africans (Taz) 3 (Depu 36 pen, 63, Boka 66)
JS Kabylie (Alg) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahly (Q)	6	2	4	0	8	3	10
AS FAR (Q)	6	2	3	1	3	2	9
Young Africans	6	2	2	2	5	4	8
JS Kabylie	6	0	3	3	1	8	3

Group C

Feb 6 – Algiers
MC Alger (Alg) 2 (Anatouf 15, Ferhat 44)
Al Hilal Omdurman (Sud) 1 (M'Bracek 77)

Feb 8 – Lubumbashi
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 1 (Molia 19)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 1 (Adams 55)

Feb 14 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2 (Leon 6, 63)
MC Alger (Alg) 0

Feb 14 – Kigali
Al Hilal Omdurman (Sud) 1 (Ebuela 26)
Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal (Q)	6	3	2	1	9	7	11
M. Sundowns (Q)	6	2	3	1	9	6	9
MC Alger	6	2	1	3	5	6	7
St-Eloi Lupopo	6	1	2	3	4	8	5

Group D

Feb 7 – Luanda
Petro Atletico (Ang) 1 (Pinto 13)
Simba (Tan) 1 (Oura 81)

Feb 8 – Bamako
Stade Malien (Mli) 1 (D. Coulibaly 54)
Esperance (Tun) 0

Feb 14 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 2 (Diakite 46, Diarra 81)
Petro Atletico (Ang) 0

Feb 14 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 1 (Oura 4)
Stade Malien (Mli) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Stade Malien (Q)	6	3	2	1	5	2	11
Esperance (Q)	6	2	3	1	6	4	9
Petro Atletico	6	1	3	2	3	6	6
Simba	6	1	2	3	5	7	5

2025-26 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group A

Feb 8 – San Pedro
San Pedro (Civ) 2 (I. Dosso 6, 38)
USM Alger (Alg) 3 (Malone 2, Likonza 5, Bouderbala 90+2)

Feb 8 – Safi
Olympic Safi (Mar) 2 (El Moudane 1, 50)
Djoliba (Mli) 1 (A. Diarra 14 pen)

Feb 14 – Algiers
USM Alger (Alg) 0
Olympic Safi (Mar) 0

Feb 15 – Bamako
Djoliba (Mli) 4 (Toure 4, 24, Keita 55, Glougbe 86)
San Pedro (Civ) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USM Alger (Q)	6	4	2	0	9	4	14
Olympic Safi (Q)	6	4	1	1	7	4	13
Djoliba	6	1	1	4	5	7	4
San Pedro	6	1	0	5	8	14	3

Group B

Feb 7 – Zanzibar City
Azam (Tan) 1 (Kanoute 24)
Maniema Union (Cod) 0

Feb 8 – Nairobi
Nairobi United (Ken) 0
Wydad (Mar) 1 (Ben Yedder 89)

Feb 15 – Casablanca
Wydad (Mar) 2 (Msindo 64 og, Nassi 90+4)
Azam (Tan) 0

Feb 15 – Lubumbashi
Maniema Union (Cod) 3 (Namboka 5, 29, Mboma Kinda 44)
Nairobi United (Ken) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Wydad (Q)	6	5	0	1	9	2	15
Maniema Union (Q)	6	4	0	2	8	3	12
Azam	6	3	0	3	4	6	9
Nairobi United	6	0	0	6	1	11	0

Group C

Feb 8 – Brazzaville
AS Otoho (Cgo) 3 (Nzaou 38, Kone 43, 79)
Stellenbosch (RSA) 0

Feb 8 – Zanzibar City
Singida Black Stars (Tan) 0
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 1 (Belhocini 3)

Feb 15 – Algiers
CR Belouizdad (Alg) 2 (Belhocini 14, El Melali 41)
AS Otoho (Cgo) 0

Feb 15 – Cape Town
Stellenbosch (RSA) 0
Singida Black Stars (Tan) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
CR Belouizdad (Q)	6	5	0	1	11	5	15
AS Otoho (Q)	6	3	0	3	10	6	9
Stellenbosch	6	1	2	3	2	9	5
Singida Black Stars	6	1	2	3	3	6	5

Group D

Feb 8 – Ndola
ZESCO United (Zam) 1 (Hiver 61 pen)
Zamalek (Egy) 0

Feb 8 – Polokwane
Kaizer Chiefs (RSA) 2 (Silva 39 pen, McCarthy 60)
Al Masry (Egy) 1 (Deghmoum 57)

Feb 14 – Cairo
Zamalek (Egy) 2 (Alvina 53, El Said 72)
Kaizer Chiefs (RSA) 1 (Lilepo 75)

Feb 14 – Suez
Al Masry (Egy) 2 (Bambo 63, Mohsen 81)
ZESCO United (Zam) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zamalek (Q)	6	3	2	1	6	4	11
Al Masry (Q)	6	3	1	2	9	7	10
Kaizer Chiefs	6	3	1	2	7	6	10
ZESCO United	6	1	0	5	3	8	3

ASIA

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Matchday 7

Feb 9 – Fergana
Nasaf (Uzb) 1 (Rakhmatov 8)
Al Shorta (Irq) 1 (Abdul-Kadhim 68)

Feb 9 – Abu Dhabu
Al Wahda (UAE) 0
Al Ahli (KSA) 0

Feb 9 – Dubai
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 0
Al Hilal (KSA) 0

Feb 9 – Doha
Al Duhail (Qat) 1 (Boulbina 81 pen)
Sharjah (UAE) 1 (Coronado 41 pen)

Feb 10 – Doha
Tractor (Irn) 0
Al Sadd (Qat) 2 (Mujica 61, Firmino 89)

Feb 10 – Jeddah
Al Ittihad (KSA) 7 (En-Nesyri 3, Aouar 20, 58, 79, R. Fernandes 49, 62, Pereira 51)
Al Gharafa (Qat) 0

Matchday 8

Feb 16 – Sharjah
Sharjah (UAE) 1 (Lucas 80 pen)
Nasaf (Uzb) 2 (Ibrahim 30 og, Abdunazarov 87)

Feb 16 – Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 4 (Al Buraikan 12, Planic 35 og, Millot 45+3, Abu Al Shamat 52)
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 3 (Breno 66, 78, Juma 90+5)

Feb 16 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Nunez 19, 77)
Al Wahda (UAE) 1 (B. Diarra 32)

Feb 16 – Baghdad
Al Shorta (Irq) 3 (Shakir 19, Sambou 57, 58)
Al Duhail (Qat) 2 (Piatek 10, Bourigeaud 45+2)

Feb 17 – Doha
Al Sadd (Qat) 1 (Mujica 38)
Al Ittihad (KSA) 4 (Aouar 10, En-Nesyri 18, Miguel 33 og, Keller 63)

Feb 17 – Al Rayyan
Al Gharafa (Qat) 0
Tractor (Irn) 2 (Hashemnejad 61, Hosseinzadeh 81)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Hilal (Q)	8	7	1	0	17	6	22
Al Ahli (Q)	8	5	2	1	21	9	17
Tractor (Q)	8	5	2	1	12	4	17
Al Ittihad (Q)	8	5	0	3	22	9	15
Al Wahda (Q)	8	4	2	2	11	7	14
Shabab Al Ahli (Q)	8	3	2	3	14	14	11
Al Duhail (Q)	8	2	2	4	16	16	8
Al Sadd (Q)	8	2	2	4	12	16	8
Sharjah	8	2	2	4	8	16	8
Al Gharafa	8	2	0	6	7	21	6
Al Shorta	8	1	2	5	6	20	5
Nasaf	8	1	1	6	9	17	4

East Region

Matchday 7

Feb 10 – Kobe
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 2 (Muto 69, G. Sakai 73)
FC Seoul (Kor) 0

Feb 10 – Hiroshima
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 2 (A. Suzuki 18 pen, 47)
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 1 (M. Guilherme 3)

Feb 10 – Shanghai
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 0
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 2 (Soma 3 pen, 88)

Feb 10 – Chengdu
Chengdu Rongcheng (Chn) 0
Buriram United (Tha) 1 (Bissoli 50)

Feb 11 – Ulsan
Ulsan HD (Kor) 1 (Bojanic 80)
Melbourne City (Aus) 2 (Caputo 36, Younis 90+3)

Feb 11 – Chuncheon
Gangwon FC (Kor) 0
Shanghai Port (Chn) 0

Matchday 8

Feb 17 – Machida
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 3 (T. Yengi 7, 55, Shirasaki 25)
Chengdu Rongcheng (Chn) 2 (Shihao 32, Felipe 90)

Feb 17 – Seoul
FC Seoul (Kor) 2 (Klimala 10 pen, Arai 27 og)
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 2 (Germain 90+3, Kinoshita 90+6)

Feb 17 – Buriram
Buriram United (Tha) 2 (Good 11, Suphanat 22)
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 0

Feb 17 – Iskandar Puteri
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 1 (M. Guilherme 74)
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 0

Feb 18 – Shanghai
Shanghai Port (Chn) 0
Ulsan HD (Kor) 0

Feb 18 – Melbourne
Melbourne City (Aus) 0
Gangwon FC (Kor) 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Machida Zelvia (Q)	8	5	2	1	15	7	17
Vissel Kobe (Q)	8	5	1	2	14	7	16
S. Hiroshima (Q)	8	4	3	1	10	6	15
Buriram Utd (Q)	8	4	2	2	10	8	14
Melbourne City (Q)	8	4	2	2	9	7	14
JDT (Q)	8	3	2	3	8	7	11
FC Seoul (Q)	8	2	4	2	10	9	10
Gangwon (Q)	8	2	3	3	9	11	9
Ulsan HD	8	2	3	3	6	8	9
Chengdu Rongcheng	8	1	3	4	7	11	6
Shanhgai Shenhua	8	1	1	6	5	13	4
Shanghai Port	8	0	4	4	2	11	4

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

West Region

Round of 16

Feb 10-11:
Al Zawraa (Irq) 3-2 Al Wasl (UAE); Esteghlal (Irn) 0-1 Al Hussein (Jor); Arkadag (Tkm) 0-1 Al Nassr (KSA); Sepahan (Irn) 2-2 Al Ahli (Qat)
Feb 17-18:
Al Wasl (UAE) 4-2 Al Zawraa (Irq) (*AET*, agg 6-5); Al Hussein (Jor) 3-2 Esteghlal (Irn) (agg 4-2); Al Nassr (KSA) 1-0 Arkadag (Tkm) (agg 2-0); Al Ahli (Qat) 1-0 Sepahan (Irn) (*AET*, agg 3-2)

Quarter-Final Draw

Al Wasl (UAE) v Al Nassr (KSA);
Al Ahli (Qat) v Al Hussein (Jor)
- *Dates TBC*

East Region

Round of 16

Feb 11-12: Ratchaburi (Tha) 3-0 Persib Bandung (Idn); Cong An Ha Noi (Vie) 0-3 *(awarded)* Tampines Rovers (Sgp); Bangkok United (Tha) 2-0 Macarthur (Aus); Pohang Steelers (Kor) 1-1 Gamba Osaka (Jpn)
Feb 18-19: Persib Bandung (Idn) 1-0 Ratchaburi (Tha) (agg 1-3); Tampines Rovers (Sgp) 3-1 Cong An Ha Noi (Vie) (agg 6-1); Macarthur (Aus) 2-2 Bangkok United (Tha) (agg 2-4); Gamba Osaka (Jpn) 2-1 Pohang Steelers (Kor) (agg 3-2)

Quarter-Final Draw

Gamba Osaka (Jpn) v Ratchaburi (Tha);
Bangkok United (Tha) v Tampines Rovers (Sgp)
- *First legs took place March 4-5;*
- *Second legs took place March 11-12*

2025-26 GULF CLUB CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

Feb 10: Sitra (Bhr) 0-1 Al Ain (UAE); Al Qadsia (Kuw) 1-0 Zakho (Irq)
Feb 18: Zakho (Irq) 3-2 Sitra (Bhr); Al Ain (UAE) 0-1 Al Qadsia (Kuw)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zakho (Q)	6	4	1	1	9	4	13
Al Qadsia (Q)	6	3	1	2	5	5	10
Al Ain	6	3	0	3	6	5	9
Sitra	6	0	2	4	4	10	2

Group B

Feb 10-11: Al Nahda (Oma) 1-1 Al Shabab (KSA); Al Tadamun Hadramaut (Yem) 0-3 Al Rayyan (Qat)
Feb 17: Al Rayyan (Qat) 3-1 Al Nahda (Oma); Al Shabab (KSA) 13-0 Al Tadamun Hadramaut (Yem)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Rayyan (Q)	6	3	3	0	15	5	12
Al Shabab (Q)	6	1	4	1	18	7	7
Al Nahda	6	1	4	1	6	7	7
Al Tadamun H.	6	1	1	4	3	23	4

MALDIVES

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Maziya (C)	18	15	3	0	53	9	48
Odi	18	12	3	3	40	12	39
New Radiant	18	11	4	3	42	16	37
Buru	18	8	5	5	40	25	29
Club Eagles	18	6	5	7	30	33	23
Victory	18	6	3	9	18	31	21
TC Sports Club	18	6	3	9	18	32	21
Green Streets	18	3	3	12	17	43	12
Valencia (R)	18	3	3	12	12	40	12
United Victory (R)	18	3	2	13	15	44	11

OCEANIA

2026 OFC PRO LEAGUE

Circuit 2

Jan 31 – Port Moresby
Vanuatu United (Van) 2 (Smith 38 pen, Cardona 58)
Tahiti United (Tah) 2 (Haewegene 27, Tehau 56)

Jan 31 – Port Moresby
PNG Hekari (PNG) 0
Auckland FC (Nzl) 2 (Ferguson 90+2, Tade 90+10 pen)

Feb 1 – Port Moresby
South Island United (Nzl) 3 (Zeb 9, Yoo 51, Rodwell 55)
South Melbourne (Aus) 3 (Uchida 18, Mikkola 45 pen, Swibel 69)

Feb 1 – Port Moresby
Bula FC (Fij) 1 (Begg 44)
Solomon Kings (Sol) 0

Feb 3 – Port Moresby
Tahiti United (Tah) 0
Auckland FC (Nzl) 4 (Donkers 3, Bayliss 50, Burns 51, Ferguson 63)

Feb 3 – Port Moresby
PNG Hekari (PNG) 2 (J. Joe 33 pen, E. Joe 57)
Vanuatu United (Van) 2 (Kaltack 11, Smith 90+14 pen)

Feb 4 – Port Moresby
Solomon Kings (Sol) 0
South Island United (Nzl) 0

Feb 4 – Port Moresby
Bula FC (Fij) 1 (Wasasala 42)
South Melbourne (Aus) 1 (Mesourouni 13)

Feb 7 – Port Moresby
Auckland FC (Nzl) 1 (Gillion 87)
Solomon Kings (Sol) 3 (Higashide 41 pen, Leslie 45+1, Lofthouse 55)

Feb 7 – Port Moresby
PNG Hekari (PNG) 1 (Orobulu 47)
South Island United (Nzl) 2 (Feutz 36 pen, Boyers 90+7)

Feb 8 – Port Moresby
Tahiti United (Tah) 1 (Tehau 69 pen)
Bula FC (Fij) 0

Feb 8 – Port Moresby
South Melbourne (Aus) 5 (Inglese 23, Uchida 45+6, Swibel 64 pen, 83, Mesourouni 90+8)
Vanuatu United (Van) 2 (Saniel 1, 71)

Circuit 3

Feb 21 – Melbourne
Tahiti United (Tah) 2 (Haewegene 18, Tehau 65)
South Island United (Nzl) 2 (Feutz 48, 86)

Feb 21 – Melbourne
South Melbourne (Aus) 1 (Eliopoulos 90+6)
Auckland FC (Nzl) 1 (Gillion 89)

Feb 22 – Melbourne
Bula FC (Fij) 0
Vanuatu United (Van) 2 (Saniel 43, Iamak 57)

Feb 22 – Melbourne
Solomon Kings (Sol) 2 (Higashide 13, David 50)
PNG Hekari (PNG) 1 (J. Joe 77)

Feb 24 – Melbourne
South Island United (Nzl) P
Auckland FC (Nzl) P
Postponed due to adverse weather conditions

Feb 24 – Melbourne
South Melbourne (Aus) P
Tahiti United (Tah) P
Postponed due to adverse weather conditions

Feb 25 – Melbourne
Vanuatu United (Van) 2 (Cardona 29, Kaltack 53)
Solomon Kings (Sol) 0

Feb 25 – Melbourne
PNG Hekari (PNG) 1 (Kepo 38)
Bula FC (Fij) 2 (Dunn 11, Auvray 36)

Feb 27 – Melbourne
Auckland FC (Nzl) 1 (Ellis 62)
Tahiti United (Tah) 0

Feb 27 – Melbourne
South Melbourne (Aus) 4 (Uchida 25, Jankovic 33, Lackay 73, Swibel 87)
South Island Utd (Nzl) 1 (Giannakopoulos 21 og)

Feb 28 – Melbourne
Vanuatu United (Van) 1 (Kaltack 30)
PNG Hekari (PNG) 3 (Ramazani 33 og, Naime 51, Gunemba 90+2)

Feb 28 – Melbourne
Solomon Kings (Sol) 2 (Lofthouse 19, Higashide 76 pen)
Bula FC (Fij) 0

Circuit 1 (rescheduled fixtures)

Mar 3 – Melbourne
Tahiti United (Tah) 2 (Degrumelle 16, Shan 47)
PNG Hekari (PNG) 1 (J. Joe 53)

Mar 3 – Melbourne
Bula FC (Fij) 0
South Island United (Nzl) 0

Mar 4 – Melbourne
South Melbourne (Aus) 5 (Uchida 34, Mikkola 52, Lampard 63, Bonada 79, Cocks 90+3)
Solomon Kings (Sol) 0

Circuit 4

South Island United (Nzl) v PNG Hekari (PNG);
Solomon Kings (Sol) v Auckland FC (Nzl);
Vanuatu United (Van) v South Melbourne (Aus);
Bula FC (Fij) v Tahiti United (Tah);
Vanuatu United (Van) v Auckland FC (Nzl);
PNG Hekari (PNG) v Tahiti United (Tah);
South Island United (Nzl) v Bula FC (Fij);
Solomon Kings (Sol) v South Melbourne (Aus)
- *Ties took place March 14-15 & March 18-19*

Circuit 5

Vanuatu United (Van) v South Island United (Nzl);
Tahiti United (Tah) v Solomon Kings (Sol);
Auckland FC (Nzl) v South Melbourne (Aus);
Bula FC (Fij) v PNG Hekari (PNG);
South Island United (Nzl) vTahiti United (Tah);
Solomon Kings (Sol) v Vanuatu United (Van);
Auckland FC (Nzl) v PNG Hekari (PNG);
South Melbourne (Aus) v Bula FC (Fij);
South Island United (Nzl) v Solomon Kings (Sol);
Tahiti United (Tah) v Vanuatu United (Van);
South Melbourne (Aus) v PNG Hekari (PNG);
Bula FC (Fij) v Auckland FC (Nzl)
- *Ties take place Apr. 11-12, Apr. 14-15 & Apr. 17-18*

2026 OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Qualifying Stage

Jan 31 – Apia
Vaivase-Tai (Sam) 1 (Scanlan 47)
Pago Youth (Asa) 1 (Collins 54)

Jan 31 – Apia
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 3 (Bunch 10, 24, Tuakana 29)
Nukuhetulu (Tga) 0

Feb 3 – Apia
Pago Youth (Asa) 2 (Ledoux 71, Collins 85 pen)
Nukuhetulu (Tga) 2 (Manu'olevao 73, Aho 90 pen)

Feb 3 – Apia
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 1 (Webb 25)
Vaivase-Tai (Sam) 1 (Fa'amatau 58)

Feb 6 – Apia
Nukuhetulu (Tga) 3 (Burton Gee 47, Lyman 59, Kite 82)
Vaivase-Tai (Sam) 5 (V. Viliamu 17 pen, Scanlan 24, N. Viliamu 42, 50, Stowers 61)

Feb 6 – Apia
Pago Youth (Asa) 0
Tupapa Maraerenga (Cok) 3 (Bunch 25, 45 pen, Harmon 90+1)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tupapa Maraerenga*	3	2	1	0	7	1	7
Vaivase-Tai	3	1	2	0	7	5	5
Pago Youth	3	0	2	1	3	6	2
Nukuhetulu	3	0	1	2	5	10	1

**Advance to August's group stage*

Internationals

FRIENDLIES

Feb 26 – Queretaro
Mexico 4 (Ledezma 22, Gonzalez 24, Gallardo 59, B. Gutierrez 90+2)
Iceland 0

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

EUROPE play-offs
- *4 slots available*

Fixtures

Path A
Mar 26: Wales v Bosnia & Herzegovina; Italy v Northern Ireland
- *Final to take place on March 31*

Path B
Mar 26: Ukraine v Sweden; Poland v Albania
- *Final to take place on March 31*

Path C
Mar 26: Slovakia v Kosovo; Turkey v Romania
- *Final to take place on March 31*

Path D
Mar 26: Czech Republic v Republic of Ireland; Denmark v North Macedonia
- *Final to take place on March 31*

Four path winners qualify for 2026 World Cup

INTER-CONFEDERATION play-offs
- *2 slots available*

Fixtures

Path 1
Mar 26: New Caledonia v Jamaica
Mar 31: DR Congo v semi-final winners

Path 2
Mar 26: Bolivia v Suriname
Mar 31: Iraq v semi-final winners

Two path winners qualify for 2026 World Cup

2026 FINALISSIMA

Mar 27: Spain v Argentina

2024-25 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Promotion/Relegation Play-Offs

Mar 26: Gibraltar v Latvia; Malta v Luxembourg
Mar 31: Latvia v Gibraltar; Luxembourg v Malta

2026-27 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE DRAW

League A

Group A1
France, Italy, Belgium, Turkey

Group A2
Germany, Netherlands, Serbia, Greece

Group A3
Spain, Croatia, England, Czech Republic

Group A4
Portugal, Denmark, Norway, Wales

League B

Group B1
Scotland, Switzerland, Slovenia, North Macedonia

Group B2
Hungary, Ukraine, Georgia, Northern Ireland

Group B3
Israel, Austria, Republic of Ireland, Kosovo

Group B4
Poland, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Romania, Sweden

League C

Group C1
Albania, Finland, Belarus, San Marino

Group C2
Montenegro, Armenia, Cyprus, Latvia/Gibraltar

Group C3
Kazakhstan, Slovakia, Faroe Islands, Moldova

Group C4
Iceland, Bulgaria, Estonia, Luxembourg/Malta

League D

Group D1
Latvia/Gibraltar, Luxembourg/Malta, Andorra

Group D2
Lithuania, Azerbaijan, Liechtenstein

- *2026-27 UEFA Nations League campaign commences September 24, 2026 with league phase due to conclude November 17, 2026*

2027 AFCON QUALIFYING

Preliminary Round

Djibouti v South Sudan;
Chad v Burundi;
Somalia v Mauritius;
Seychelles v Lesotho;
Eritrea v Eswatini;
Sao Tome & Principe v Ethiopia
- *Two legged ties to be played March 25-31*

2027 ASIAN CUP QUALIFYING

Third Round

Group A
Mar 31:
Tajikistan v Philippines; Maldives v Timor-Leste

Group B
Mar 31: Lebanon v Yemen; Bhutan v Brunei

Group C
Mar 31:
India v Hong Kong; Singapore v Bangladesh

Group D
Mar 31: Thailand v Turkmenistan;
Chinese Taipei v Sri Lanka

Group E
Mar 31:
Syria v Afghanistan; Pakistan v Myanmar

Group F
Mar 31: Vietnam v Malaysia; Nepal v Laos

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Dante

Bayern Munich v Barcelona

2012-13 Champions League semi-final, Munich

The evergreen Brazilian centre-back looks back on the key game on the road to winning the Champions League crown with Bayern Munich in 2013

Organiser...Dante rallies his team-mates during the semi-final

This was my first time playing against Barcelona. I was a fan of the club and dreamed of playing for them one day – but I didn't have enough quality! I still love their philosophy and watching how they control games. It was a big pleasure to beat them. I was so proud of myself and my team-mates.

Bayern Munich have such a strong identity and values. As soon as I arrived at the club, I could see how demanding it was. We had big stars, but we worked so hard every day and demanded so much from ourselves. That's why we won four trophies that season. We had a culture of winning and the mentality of champions.

But Barcelona were still the favourites. We knew their qualities. That team was so strong – you felt like they'd never lose the ball. They played quickly and the accuracy of their passing was unbelievable. They were so intelligent, always operating in the right space and with the right body position.

We knew that we weren't better than Barcelona. We needed a brilliant performance from everybody to beat them. The atmosphere in the stadium was crazy because our fans knew we needed their support. They kept pushing us.

Before the game, the message from the coach was that we were facing the best players in the world, but we could achieve something as a team if we stuck together. They were going to dominate possession, so we needed to be strong without the ball. We needed to believe in ourselves, trust each other and be brave.

The first goal came from a corner. Barcelona managed to clear the ball initially, but Robben put it back in. I won the header and Thomas Muller arrived at the back post to score. He didn't need a second chance in those situations.

Barcelona put us under a lot of pressure, but we defended well. When Pedro crossed from the right, I slid in to deflect the ball behind and stop Lionel Messi from scoring. That was a really important moment. We made so many blocks and clearances that night. I was always organising and encouraging the players in front of me.

Bayern Munich 4-0 Barcelona
(Muller 25, 82, Gomez 49, Robben 73)

Bayern Munich	Barcelona
Manager: Jupp Heynckes	**Manager:** Tito Vilanova
Neuer	Valdes
Alaba	Dani Alves
Dante	Pique
Boateng	Bartra
Lahm	Alba
Schweinsteiger	Sanchez
Martinez	Xavi
Ribery (Shaqiri 89)	Busquets
Gomez (Luiz Gustavo 71)	Messi
Muller (Pizarro 83)	Pedro (Villa 83)
Robben	Iniesta

It was beautiful to see Messi up close on the pitch. More than his talent, it's his understanding of the game. He always stayed between the lines and watched how the defence shuffled across so he could find a solution. His decision-making was incredible – he was always a second ahead. You'd try to anticipate what he was going to do with the ball but it would already be gone.

We were ahead at half-time. We needed to keep a clean sheet, but we knew that scoring again was the best way to qualify. We stayed compact and narrow, and played with a lot of intensity. We had to be patient and organised, accepting that we wouldn't have the ball for a long time. Thankfully, Mario Gomez soon made it 2-0 from another corner.

"Important moment"...Dante slides in to intercept a cross and stop Lionel Messi from scoring

Franck Ribery and Arjen Robben were our key players that year. They had so much quality, particularly in one-v-one situations, but they had to work hard defensively in this game. As well as running and fighting, which helped us a lot, they were really dangerous on the counter attack.

Robben dribbled past Jordi Alba to score the third from a tight angle. Then, late on, David Alaba set up a second goal for Muller.

We were so focused. The added pressure gave us more concentration, determination and aggression. At the end, I was more tired mentally than physically. The game was so fast that your brain had to be switched on in every second, trying to anticipate Barcelona's attacks and stop them from scoring. It was intense, but enjoyable too.

> "We knew that we weren't better than Barcelona. We needed a brilliant performance from everybody to beat them"

After the game, I said to the team: "Guys, if we stay together like this and we play with the same intensity, we'll win the Champions League." Although we loved the ball, we played like animals without it. We ran a lot and suffered together. In the end, I was right. We won the second leg in Barcelona and beat Borussia Dortmund in the final, but this was the most important game.

Interview by Sean Cole

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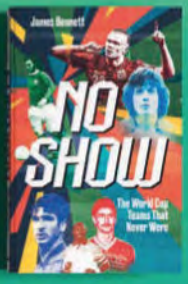

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